# The Political Lives of Information

## Information and the Production of Development in India

Janaki Srinivasan

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# THE POLITICAL LIVES OF INFORMATION: INFORMATION AND THE PRODUCTION OF DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

JANAKI SRINIVASAN

The MIT Press
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# ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS IN THE TEXT

| | |
|---|---|
| AO | Agricultural Officer |
| BC | Backward Caste |
| BDO | Block Development Office; also Block Development Officer |
| BJP | Bharatiya Janata Party |
| BPL | Below Poverty Line |
| CD | Compact Disc |
| CIDA | Canadian International Development Agency |
| CM | Chief Minister |
| CS | Chief Secretary |
| DFID | Department for International Development |
| EIC | East India Company |
| FIR | First Information Report |
| FRW | Famine Relief Work |
| IARI | Indian Agricultural Research Institute |
| ICTs | Information and Communication Technologies |
| ICTD | Information and Communication Technologies and Development |
| IDRC | International Development Research Centre |
| IDSJ | Institute for Development Studies Jaipur |
| INP | Indo-Norwegian Project |
| ITU | International Telecommunications Union |
| IVRP | Information Village Research Project |
| JRY | Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (Jawahar Employment Scheme) |
| KSMTF | Kerala Swatantara Matsya Thozilali Federation (Kerala Independent Fishworkers' Federation) |
| KVK | Krishi Vigyan Kendra |
| KW | Knowledge Worker |
| LBSNAA | Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration |
| MB | Measurement Book |
| MDG | Millennium Development Goals |

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| | |
|---|---|
| MGNREGA | Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act |
| MGNREGS | Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme |
| MKSS | Mazdoor Kisaan Shakti Sangathan (Union for the empowerment of laborers and peasants) |
| MLA | Member of Legislative Assembly |
| MoU | Memorandum of Understanding |
| MSSRF | M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation |
| NCPRI | National Campaign for People's Right to Information |
| NGO | Nongovernment Organization |
| NIE | New Institutional Economics |
| NOS | *Namma Ooru Saidhi* (News from our village) |
| PA system | Public Announcement system |
| PASIC | Pondicherry Agro Service and Industries Corporation Limited |
| PC | Personal Computer |
| PRA | Participatory Rural Appraisal |
| PRI | Panchayati Raj Institutions |
| PSTN | Public Switched Telephone Network |
| RML | Info Services  Reuters Market Light |
| Rs. | Rupees (Indian currency) |
| RTI | Right to Information |
| SC | Scheduled Caste |
| SDM | Sub-Divisional Magistrate |
| SHG | Self-Help Group |
| SIFFS | South Indian Federation of Fishing Societies |
| SMS | Short Messaging Service |
| UN | United Nations |
| UN ECA | UN Economic Commission for Africa |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| UPS | Uninterrupted Power Supply |
| USAID | US Agency for International Development |
| VAC | Value Addition Centre |
| VAO | Village Administrative Officer |
| VHF | Very High Frequency |
| VKC | Village Knowledge Centre |
| VRC | Village Resource Centre |
| WDR | World Development Report |
| WTO | World Trade Organization |

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## TERMS FOR INFORMATION AND RELATED CONCEPTS IN INDIAN LANGUAGES

| | |
|---|---|
| Aṟivu | Knowledge, intelligence, wisdom (Tamil, Malayalam) |
| Aavaṇaṅkaḷ | Documents, archive (Tamil) |
| Dastaavez | Document (Hindi, Urdu) |
| Jaankaari | Information, knowledge (Hindi) |
| Kaagaz | Paper(s) (Hindi, Urdu) |
| Khabar | News (Hindi, Urdu) |
| Pativugaḷ | Records (Tamil) |
| Soochana | Information (Hindi) |
| Saidhi/Ceyti | Message, information (Tamil) |
| Thagaval | Information (Tamil, Malayalam) |
| Vivaraṅṅaḷ | Information (Malayalam) |

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# MAPS OF FIELDWORK REGIONS

## KERALA

The fishing markets that I studied were in the coastal Thiruvananthapuram district in south Kerala and in the coastal Kozhikode district in north Kerala.

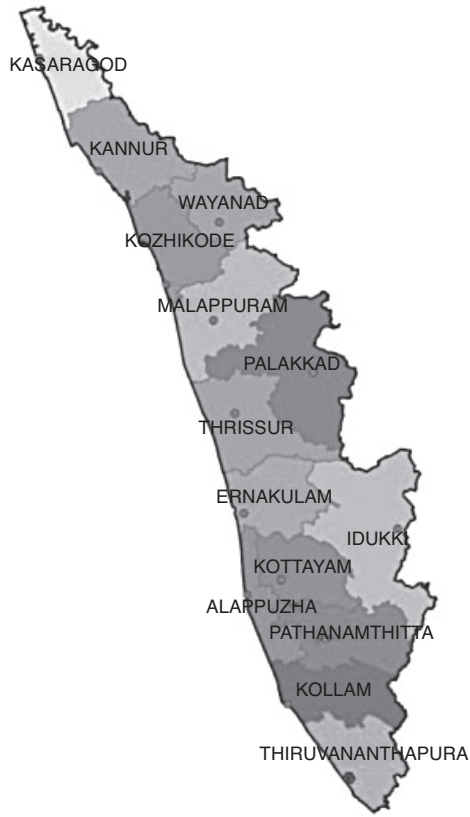


Figure 0.1
Kerala district map: Source: http://www.ceo.kerala.gov.in/uploadedimages/large/KERALA_DISTRICT.jpg.

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## PUDUCHERRY

The Swaminathan Foundation's Information Village Research Project (IVRP) that I studied operated in Puducherry district in the Union Territory of Puducherry (in addition to Puducherry district, figure 0.2 shows the three other districts of the Union Territory). Within Puducherry district, the regions covered by the project and mentioned in the book lie roughly within the black box marked in figure 0.3.

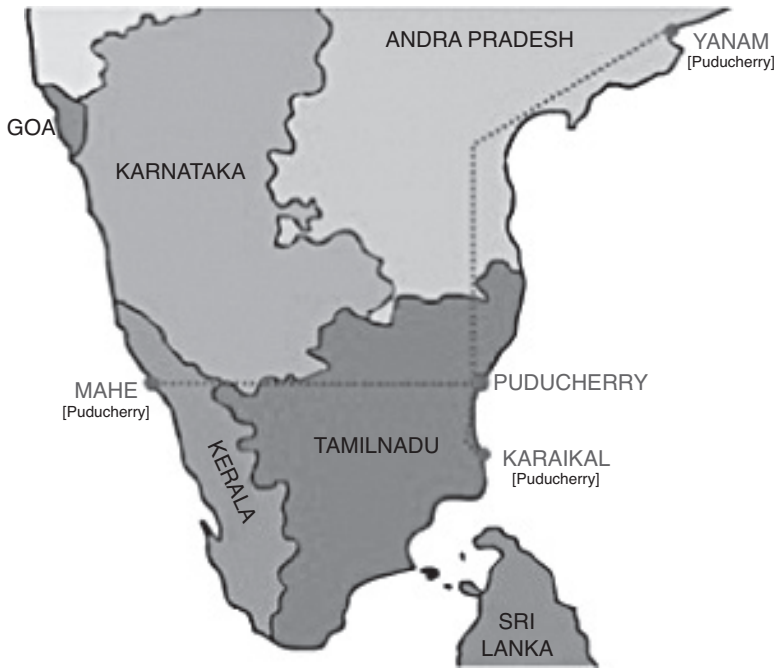


Figure 0.2
Location of the Union Territory of Puducherry and Puducherry district within India. Source: https://puducherry-dt.gov.in/history/.

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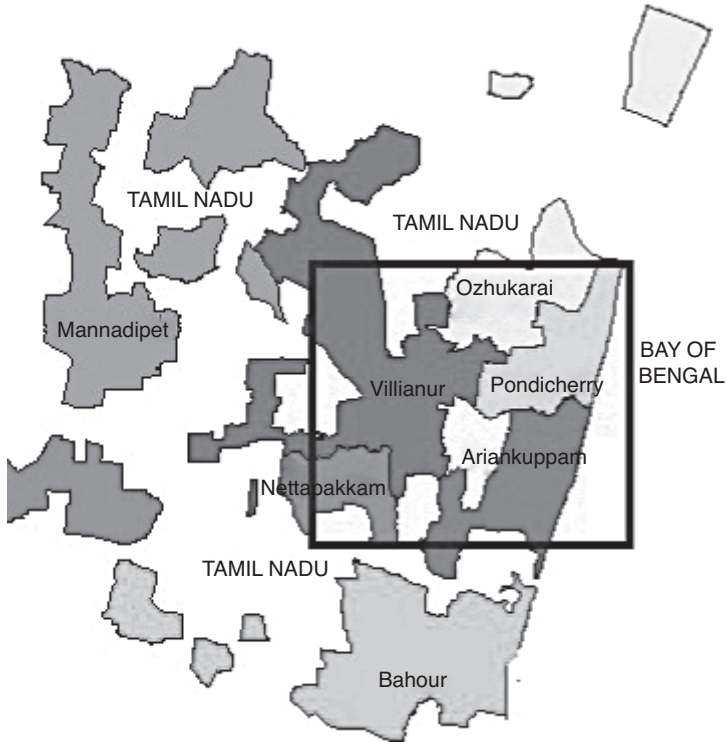


Figure 0.3
Regions covered by the IVRP within Puducherry district. Source: https://www.py.gov.in/sites/default/files/mainmap.jpg.

## RAJASTHAN

Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan's early campaigns that I studied operated in the state of Rajasthan, and within that, mostly in Rajsamand, Ajmer, Bhilwara, and Pali districts shown in figure 0.4 below.

Other than the city of Jaipur (in Jaipur district), the following villages and panchayats find mention in the book either as venues for MKSS's campaigns or as places where my interviews took place.

In Rajsamand district: Barar, Bhim, Deogarh, Devdungri, Kaamli Ghat, Sohangarh, Vijayapura
In Ajmer district: Asan panchayat, Beawar, Tilonia, Jawaja, Paluna
In Bhilwara district: Chileshwar
In Pali district: Kot Kirana panchayat

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Figure 0.4
Districts of Rajasthan. Source: https://industries.rajasthan.gov.in/content/industries/rajasthan-foundation/about-rajasthan/rajasthan-maps.html#.

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# 1

# THE POWER OF INFORMATION

> Information empowers and information frees people at all levels of society, regardless of their gender, their level of education or their status, to make rational decisions and to improve the quality of their lives.
> —K. Y. Amaoko, executive secretary of UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) (United Nations 1997)

> Of what use is my knowing?
> —Palaniammal, daily wage agricultural worker, Puducherry, India

## INTRODUCTION

When I met Palaniammal in the village of Kilipet in Puducherry in September 2009, she must have been in her mid-thirties.[1] She was a daily wage agricultural worker who told me how she and others like her were sitting idle at home because they could find no agricultural work in the vicinity of Kilipet. I asked her about her village information center and whether it helped her find livelihood opportunities. Palaniammal responded saying, "We may get to know things about loans and how to apply [for them] through the maiyam (center), but therinju enna punyam? (Of what use is my knowing?) . . . All this effort [putting together the documents required for the loan], but we get no benefits."

Palaniammal was referring to the fact that someone like her would receive no loans because she did not possess the right assets, documents, or connections. So, what good was information about the scheme or loan to her? Palaniammal's statement was made in the context of her village information center, which was part of the Information Village Research Project (IVRP). The IVRP, in turn, drew on a belief closely resembling the UN executive secretary's—that information would bring new livelihood opportunities

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to individuals like Palaniammal. At a moment when many entities consider information—and, to varying degrees, its cognates, knowledge, and data—as indispensable in improving the quality of people's lives, this book is an attempt to understand why UN ECA's executive secretary Amaoko and my respondent Palaniammal feel so differently about the benefits of information in people's lives. More specifically, this book explores how politics shapes the definition and evaluation of information for the diverse actors who make or are the targets of claims such as the one that prefaces this chapter.

Whether or not information empowers people, rhetoric about it has powered several domains of activity—education, health, governance, and communication among others—in recent times. Indeed, "Information for All" is one of the program pillars of the Government of India's cross-domain, flagship Digital India program whose vision since its inception in 2015 has been to "transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy."[2] The creation of a global information society—or more localized information revolutions—has been discussed extensively in the popular press, by policymaking bodies and think tanks, as well as in academic research since the early 2000s (Drori 2007; Grace et al. 2003; InfoDev and Center for Democracy and Technology 2002; Rayward 2014; World Bank 2003).[3] It is equally important to note that people across the political spectrum have embraced information. This book focuses on one piece of the growing global cult of information, knowledge, and data: the centrality accorded to information in the domain of international development and poverty alleviation.

*The Political Lives of Information* draws on archival and ethnographic research on three prominent cases engaged with improving the lives and livelihoods of low-income populations in different parts of India. Importantly, while the concept of information is central to the working of each, the ideological underpinnings of the three cases span the political spectrum. For my first case, I examine a much-discussed example of fishermen in the state of Kerala whose livelihoods were held to have improved following the introduction of mobile phones, subsequent price information sharing among fishermen, and the creation of more efficient markets. The second case is of internet-enabled community information kiosks established by the private nonprofit Swaminathan Foundation to address poverty and improve livelihoods in villages of Puducherry. The third is the case of campaigns by a people's political movement in Rajasthan, Mazdoor Kisaan Shakti Sangathan

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(MKSS), that campaigned for the right to (government) information, arguing that such a right would equal a right to life and livelihood. Using these diverse cases, the book shows how the multiple meanings and ambiguity associated with the term "information"—rather than some value intrinsic to it—have enabled actors espousing diverse ideologies to incorporate information in their work and to make distinct claims about its role in shaping societal change. By examining both the proponents and targets of such initiatives, and the dissimilar value that the two place on information in practice, my work challenges claims about the universal value of information. It emphasizes, instead, *how* information has been made valuable in certain moments and for specific populations.

Further, even as these initiatives have succeeded to different extents and in diverse ways for distinct demographics, I find that their claims about the inevitable value of information in addressing poverty have, whether intentionally or unintentionally, invariably ended up de-emphasizing politics. The more faith is placed on what *information* can do, I argue, the lesser the attention paid to the role of specific social structures, individual agency, and material form in the defining, production, and leveraging of this information. As development agencies and national governments continue to channel their attention and resources to information (and even more, data), my work examines the stakes involved in conceptualizing information as self-standing and in isolation when it is, in fact, constituted by and deeply embedded in the ideologies and actions of those who leverage it.

Located at the intersection of critical information studies and development studies, this book develops an alternative framework that squarely situates information in social relations and material practices. To reclaim the role of politics and operationalize a situated analysis of the circulation of information, I reintroduce "information order," a heuristic first proposed by the historian C. A. Bayly (2000). Defined as a social formation that includes an assemblage of information systems, channels, and forms and agents of communication, the construct of an information order offers a way to counter the popular and disembedded view of information as autonomous and intrinsically valuable by foregrounding the social and material roots of information. In subsequent chapters, I build on this alternative framework to analyze the divergent political lives of information in the three cases I examine, focusing especially on the politics of how information is produced and how class, caste, and gender continue to shape who can access and leverage

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it in these cases. Furthermore, I find that the power to label some things information and others not is at least as significant as the capacity to then produce, access, or leverage it.

Toward understanding these lives of information and establishing why such an understanding is even worth pursuing in the context of poverty alleviation, development, and social change, this introductory chapter commences by examining how we got here in the first place: how did information became so prominent in academia, development think tanks, and beyond in the past few decades? Having traced this evolution, I turn next to what it is about the term "information" that has allowed it to be taken up as this tool for development. I argue that it is the term's ambiguity and a certain blandness to it that have made this possible. But has this reification of information also depoliticized development? I draw on literature from development studies to examine this possibility, its implications, and the stakes involved. Together, these threads bring me to the book's primary argument on the relationship between information and the politics of development. The following section introduces the construct of an information order and its utility in examining this key relationship and, by extension, the political lives of information. Finally, I introduce in greater detail the three sites where I explored information and that form the core of this book. I close the chapter with an outline of the remaining chapters of the book.

## THE RISE OF INFORMATION

Today, the term *information* is so commonplace in our everyday lives (especially, but not exclusively, among English-speaking populations) that it is hard to think of a time when it was not so ubiquitous, was used differently, or had different associations. Yet, we now know that it *has* been conceptualized differently in other time periods and in various disciplines (Day 2001; Duguid 2015; Kline 2015 Mirowski 2002; Nunberg 1996).[4] In this section, I trace how information made its way into development research and practice, examining the struggles that took place en route over its definition and significance. I follow Duguid's (2015) approach in this regard, hoping that, in the course of the tracing, "struggles with this word can tell us something about struggles in their world [i.e., in the world of their writers] and not only theirs, but also our own" (349). To do this, I begin with the rise of information in cybernetics, move on to its prominence in economics

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within academia, and then to how it got picked up by development funding agencies and entered their discourse and practice. The subsequent section dissects the attributes associated with information in the world of development and examines what this framing foregrounds and obscures.

Unlike its longer history in colloquial parlance, in the fields of information theory, cybernetics, and economics, the word information became associated with more specific and specialized meanings relatively recently. In his history of the current "information age," Robert Kline (2015) suggests that the post–World War II "rise, fall, and reinvention of cybernetics that occurred alongside the rise of information theory in the United States" played a crucial role "in the emergence of a utopian information narrative" (6).[5] Kline (2015) contends that in this "cybernetics moment," scientists used the language and concepts of cybernetics and information theory to turn "the metaphor of information into the matter-of-fact description of what is processed, stored, and retrieved in physical, biological, and social systems" (6). This broad conception of information, in turn, led to a confidence that "the search for an informational component could be extended usefully to any system" (Schiller 1988) and, further, to the wide dissemination of concepts that emerged in information theory among other disciplines. In fact, Kline (2015) argues that the cybernetics moment reached its peak with the "adoption and modification" of cybernetics and information theory "in biology, engineering, the social sciences, and popular culture in the 1950s and 1960s" (6). Cybernetics and information theory were instrumental in modeling human behavior at that time and profoundly influenced work in artificial intelligence, cognitive psychology, and economics (Kline 2015; Mirowski 2002).[6] Herbert Simon's work in the 1950s and '60s on bounded rationality, as well as his work with Allen Newell on artificial intelligence for instance, relied crucially on the role of information in human activity and on an information-processing model of the human mind (Dreyfus 1992; Kline 2015).

More than specific theories, it was "just the concept of information, as an entity in its own right" (Neisser 1988, 84)[7] and the fundamental shift to a paradigm where human activity was understood as "information processing" and humans as "information processors" that profoundly transformed academic disciplines during and beyond the cybernetics moment. Economics was no exception and is especially pertinent here given its centrality to development speak and efforts.

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> One could search in vain the texts of the first two generations of mathematical neoclassical theorists for anything approaching a coherent conception of information as an entity or as a process; yet within another generation it had emerged triumphant from a "slum dwelling" (Stigler, 1961) into the limelight. (Mirowski 2002, 371)

Mirowski (2002) argues that this shift in economics was influenced by the ascendance of cybernetics, game theory, and the Cold War preoccupation with information in the US (371). Ideas of information have been invoked in a range of economic analyses at least since the 1950s, including in risk (Arrow 1974; Shubik 1952; Shubik 1954), demand analysis (Theil 1965), market failures (Akerlof 1970; Stigler 1961; Stiglitz 1979), decision-making (Kahneman 1973; Theil 1967), and even (or, perhaps, especially) the structuring of planned economies (Lange 1970).[8] While economists had long used the assumption of perfect information in their work, until this time they had treated information as exactly that—an assumption in the background. They had not, for the most part, examined the extent to which even small deviations from the assumption of perfect information changed outcomes in the real world (Rothschild and Stiglitz 1976; Stiglitz 2002). Moreover, they had not really *defined* information. The growing focus on information as an entity in the cybernetics moment allowed for information to be defined and examined as an input in human actions and transactions. As more research in this period started suggesting that certain phenomena in the real world could simply not be explained without modifying their assumptions of perfect information, economists started to explicitly address the role of information as an important input in economic activity.[9]

The field of behavioral economics also built on and contributed to these conversations about the criticality of information in how humans behave. Macro-economic theorists of this time, meanwhile, were conducting information sector analyses (Machlup 1962; Porat 1977; Rubin 1988) and studying the effect of information and knowledge on economic growth (Romer 1986).[10] It is impossible, and perhaps irrelevant, to build an exhaustive list of such work in economics here. Suffice it for our purposes to say that, far from its "slum dwelling in the town of economics" (Stigler 1961), the study of information became central to the discipline. Indeed, the 1970s have been called the "era of economics of information" (Lamberton 1996, xvi) and are also the time when the first anthologies in the field were compiled (Braman 2006; Lamberton 1971).

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As economics experienced a shift from the competitive to the informational paradigm (Stiglitz 2002, 2017), information economics dealt significantly with the role of market and nonmarket institutions in dealing with costly, imperfect, or asymmetric information in the real world (Akerlof 1970; Rothschild and Stiglitz 1976; Spence 1973; Stiglitz 1979; Theil 1967). Moreover, the main categories of "information problems"—the cost of providing information, information imperfections, and information asymmetries—started being identified as intimately linked to economic growth and development.[11] Research within information economics further argued that market failures associated with information imperfections were more prevalent in "developing" countries (Lamberton 1973; Stiglitz 2002) and that these countries were also less likely to have the kinds of nonmarket institutions that could effectively ameliorate such failures (Stiglitz 1979). Information asymmetries, too, were more likely to be acute in developing countries, further preventing the effective functioning of markets. Stiglitz and several other economists went on to leverage their research on imperfect information and information asymmetries to recommend an agenda for a new development economics and for policy shifts that would mandate state intervention in such circumstances. With time, the visibility of the informational turn in economics only grew.[12] Furthermore, its uptake extended far beyond academia and, in particular, among development think tanks, banks, and other institutions that had historically maintained strong ties with the discipline of economics.[13] The next section examines the growth of the idea of information among such agencies.

## INFORMATION AS DEVELOPMENT TOOL

> When the crucial information and communication needs of the poor go unmet, quality of life may significantly degrade, resulting in social exclusion, marginalization, isolation, alienation and humiliation.
> —World Bank (2003)

This excerpt provides an indication of the value that development institutions such as the World Bank had come to attach to information by the beginning of the twenty-first century. In addition to academic research that suggested a link between access to information and economic development, this emphasis on information was also fueled by continuing advancements

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in semiconductor-based information and communications technologies (ICTs).[14] Access to telecommunications had been an important development goal since the late 1970s; however, the focus until the 1990s was on communication and typically telephony rather than information provision.[15] In the 1990s, partly encouraged by the working of the personal computer and the internet in developed countries, development agencies started to see semiconductor-based ICTs as a potential development tool that could help with information provision in low-income communities that were seen as lacking information. Access to information in these communities, the reasoning went, would lead to better economic decision making, effective markets, economic gain, and ultimately to economic development. The reduction of information asymmetries became an important goal for development projects in the 1990s.

As information grew prominent among development agencies, its meaning and place in the domain shifted, much as had happened within the discipline of economics in academia. The World Bank's World Development Reports (WDRs)[16]—which have been influential in shaping official development discourse and also useful indicators of broader trends in the development domain since their inception in 1978—reflect some of these shifts in emphasis and priority vis-à-vis information. Between the 1980s and 2000s, their emphasis on information grew, with information being seen as a critical input for improving livelihoods and making markets function better. The prominence given to dispensing such information rose as did the potential role for digital technologies in this process.[17] The rising emphasis on the lack of information or on the urgent need for information provision was not confined to the WDRs either. The Bank's other publications routinely manifested similar trends. Describing those living in rural and remote areas as poor and socially isolated, a 2003 World Bank report on ICTs and millennium development goals (MDGs) argues that such populations "lack information relevant to their particular situation and thus have difficulty interacting with other community members or other communities" which "serves to reinforce their marginalization" (World Bank 2003, 12). In this situation, ICTs "can be of great value in bringing people together, bridging geographic distances and providing relevant information about and to the poor" (World Bank 2003, 12). Further, they can "improve information flows and communication services to make government and organizations serving the poor more efficient, transparent and accountable" (World

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Bank 2003, 12). Elsewhere, World Bank publications have argued that for rural, unconnected populations, "the Internet offers a cheap and versatile mechanism connecting users with a global repository of information" (Grace, Kenny, and Qiang 2003, 17) and that "ICTs provide global access to information . . . narrowing the 'information divide' between lesser and more developed countries" (Infodev 2007, 4). What is significant here is that development agencies started to treat information as an inherently valuable input in economic processes. Moreover, it was an input that people could lack and, therefore, one that targeted initiatives could provide them.[18]

Of course, not all development agencies framed the "problem" or their solution to it in exactly the same way. One of the first development agencies to research the impact of information on development, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), published a report in 1993 that brought to the fore struggles over what constitutes information (Menou 1993).[19] It highlighted the challenges involved in implying a causal relationship between information and development and in measuring impact. The report went on to suggest that information is only likely to be useful when it is not referred to in the abstract and is subject-oriented.[20] Besides the IDRC,[21] the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID),[22] as well as state agencies in various low-income countries (some of them funded by international agencies), were encouraging and supporting development projects that focused on information by the late 1990s.[23] The UN also bestowed its support on the idea of building a global information society.[24]

Indeed, for all the differences between them, by the late 1990s and early 2000s, most development agencies and funding institutions started to perceive information as the "primary social resource of this era" (Drori 2007).[25] Drori (2007) further suggests that their quest for an inclusive information society was largely driven by a vision of "marginalized peoples . . . connecting with the wealth of information that is available to people everywhere" (311). Thus, by the turn of the century, the emergence of a concept of information "as an entity in its own right" (Neisser 1988, 84)—as concrete, bounded, and associated with a specific set of properties, economic value, and outcomes—had transformed development discourse and practice, much as it had the academic disciplines touched by cybernetics and information theory in the 1950s and beyond.

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## THE IDEA OF INFORMATION AND ITS UTILITY AS A DEVELOPMENT TOOL

The framing of information problems and information provision in the development sphere drew significantly on some "properties" of information. For instance, the notions of information asymmetries, gaps, and problems popularized by the discipline of economics, and frequently invoked in the writings of development agencies and initiatives, rested on the measurability and comparability of information (Menou 1993; World Bank 1990, 1991, 1994, 1998, 2003).[26] Even oft-repeated terms like "information-rich" and "information-poor" implied these attributes (Menou 1993). So did the suggestion that individuals or communities could have more or less information or lack it. ("Illiterate people . . . may simply lack information about programs" [World Bank 1990, 37].) While few of these instances defined information explicitly, most of them implied a particular understanding of what constituted information, who possessed it, and who did/may not. In the above case, for example, the information in question was that which was provided by official expert sources, which was also why it became possible for some people to "lack" it. Another idea—that more information is better—rested on an understanding of information as having autonomous economic value. Finally, the value of information was perceived to persist through its transfer from one entity to another.

If these attributes or properties associated with information made it amenable to being fashioned as a development tool, "the term's polysemy and hints of causality" proved no less useful to this endeavor (Duguid 2015, 367).[27] At different moments, the term has been used variously to indicate a process, something in people's heads, a thing external to humans, or all of these (Duguid 2015; Hetherington 2012; Kline 2015; Nunberg 1996). Duguid's point is made in the context of the eighteenth-century use of the term in European and American contexts. Others have argued, drawing on more recent contexts, that the word information "levels the distinctions among disparate categories of communicative actions and artefacts" (Agre 1995, 226) and that it is, in fact, able to perform the work it does precisely because it "fuzzes the boundaries between several genetically distinct categories of experience" (Nunberg 1996, 114). Until the mid-nineteenth century, Nunberg (1996) suggests, there was no way "to speak of information as a kind of abstract stuff present in the world, disconnected from the

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situations that it is about" (111). As information started being used in the abstract, a more particularistic sense of invoking it "came increasingly to be restricted to the sorts of things you might learn from a book or from an official or institutional source" (Nunberg 1996, 114). Further complicating the terrain was an older sense of information as "instruction," "education," or "formation of mind" that became conflated with this particularistic sense of information. As a result of the conflation, information is, on the one hand, increasingly regarded as commoditized, corpuscular, measurable, and (based on advances in information economics) possessing economic value. On the other hand, information is also imputed an autonomous value—in the sense of being educational—that is relatively context-independent. It is this possibility of moving between the two senses of information—particularistic and abstract—that has allowed for a linking of bits, bytes, and documents to development and socioeconomic transformation.

To understand how this has affected the development domain, let me return to the WDRs: has a conflation of these senses allowed for certain claims about information that might have been difficult without this ambiguity in meaning? The earliest WDRs mainly focused on particularistic information, such as "market information"[28] or "information on cropping practices,"[29] as useful or essential. Later WDRs, however, increasingly proclaim information-in-the-abstract as useful and essential as well (for example, "information flows that make a market economy function better" or in a suggestion that the state focus on supporting the private sector "by providing information" among other things[30]). Now, it might be hard to deny that information about cropping practices is critical for farmers. However, when particularistic information simply adds up to give us abstract information, it also becomes impossible to refute a statement such as "information flows make an economy function better" or "information is power," that does not specify what that information consists of or is about. Even where this ambiguity was not intentionally produced, it has helped frame claims that might have been inconceivable using a single sense of information (whether particularistic or abstract).

A second possibility that the polysemy of information allows for is associating with different ideologies and politics. I turn again to the WDRs for examples in the development domain that illustrate this point. In this case, an additional reason for using the WDRs is that they also provide a window into the political-economic landscape within which shifts in their

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use of the term information were anchored. In his analysis of WDRs over the years, Yusuf (2008) points to at least three major shifts that the reports' content has reflected: "from state-directed to market-directed development; from structural to sectoral issues; and from macro-economic to microeconomic ones" (45).[31] I argue that the polysemy of the term made it easier to reflect these shifts vis-à-vis their recommendations about information. Thus, in their initial years, WDRs used the term information largely in the context of recommending government support for agriculture. For example, WDR 1978 lists "information on improved cropping practices" as a critical input that farmers require and that states must help them receive (World Bank 1978, 42). In the 1980s, with a shift in the World Bank's focus to market-directed development and on getting prices right, mentions of information too are in the context of market-based transactions and the (limited) role of the state [as a "dispenser of information" and in making markets work (World Bank 1988, 153)]. Information continued to play a role through the 1990s and during the Bank's attempts to refashion itself as a "knowledge bank" under James Wolfenson. While the Bank's focus on markets continued in the 1990s, it was now more concerned with the role of the state in supporting and regulating markets as well as ensuring transparency: this became the context in which information was invoked in this era.[32] Finally, with advancements in digital technologies since the 1990s, the annual WDRs started to more frequently bring up themes pertaining to ICTs and *their* relationship with information.[33]

In summary, I submit that the carving out of information as a distinct entity with definite properties and value, and its polysemy, have allowed for players of various stripes in the development arena to define information problems and to frame information provision as a worthwhile and feasible solution to the particular concerns they are attempting to address. But might this extreme focus on information—its reification—have simultaneously blinded us to other dimensions of "the problem"? Consider in particular Agre's (1995) argument about the uptake of this term—as opposed to more contentious terms such as "belief" or even "knowledge" that can evoke "deep and troubling questions of epistemology"—by diverse constituencies (225). It is precisely the "striking blandness" and perceived neutrality of information that makes it hard for anyone to be a skeptic about it (Agre 1995; Nunberg 1996). How then should we attempt to think through the popular uptake of this "strikingly bland" term specifically in the typically

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contentious sphere of development? To examine these questions, I first flesh out why the trajectory of information laid out so far can be treated as an instance of reification, with all the attendant benefits and costs of reification. The subsequent section explores what the reification of information might obscure in the specific context of development. I then build on this analysis to arrive at my research question and framework.

## THE REIFICATION OF INFORMATION IN DEVELOPMENT

Wenger (1998) defines reification as "the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into 'thingness'" (58).[34] What reification also does is distinguish between what is included or excluded as an instance of that reification. In the case of information, its transformation into a concrete, bounded object associated with a specific set of properties and economic value as outlined earlier could be considered its reification. Among other things, the reification of information has allowed for it to be differentiated from that which is *not* information (based on its objectivity, sources, and so on). Reification has also allowed for discerning differences between "good" and "bad" information (whether it is reliable, true, comprehensive, and so forth).

Reifications are useful because they offer a shortcut to communication and provide a point of focus around which negotiation for meaning can occur. In the case of information, reification allows for it to be treated as a well-understood entity that a wide range of communities can make use of, including agents of the state, donor organizations, nonprofits, social movements, and citizen groups. Thus, valuing information as an object having a single, stable meaning and universal value is useful for at least two reasons. First, it helps focus attention on information. Second, treating it as a coherent object that automatically leads to certain behavior and outcomes makes "information solutions" possible to devise and deploy. However,

> The power of reification—its succinctness, its portability, its potential physical persistence, its focusing effect—is also its danger. The politician's slogan can become a substitute for a deep understanding of and commitment to what it stands for. The tool can ossify activity around its inertness. Procedures can hide broader meanings in blind sequences of operations. And the knowledge of a formula can lead to the illusion that one fully understands the processes it describes. The evocative power of reification is thus double-edged. (Wenger 1998, 61)

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This double-edge is particularly palpable in the case of information since information, as I have been discussing, does not have a single stable meaning to begin with. The benefit edge of the reification of information is easy to see as outlined in the previous paragraph. But reification also shifts the focus *away* from how the idea or thing called information is used in practice to assumptions about what it is and how it will be valued or used. The danger of reification in this case is that understanding information as a good that can be easily moved from person to person while retaining its value obscures the fact that the value and meaning of information is always derived from its embedding in specific social relations and a material form. Following Wenger's (1998) warning that reifications can "hide broader meanings" (61), I turn next to the literature on depoliticization to understand one dimension of this "broader meaning" whose obscuring has long concerned those studying development: politics.

## INFORMATION AS AN ANTIPOLITICS MACHINE?

Studies of development schemes, initiatives, or projects have been concerned with the idea that these initiatives depoliticize change as they go about their plans by shifting the focus from structural inequalities to technical solutions (Anand 2017; Benjamin et al. 2007; Crush 1995; Escobar 1995; Goldman 2006; Ferguson 1994; Harriss 2002; Irani et al. 2010; Li 2007; Mitchell 1995; Mosse 2004). Development discourse significantly shapes how problems get defined, resources allocated, and solutions implemented. Critics have detailed how the project of development proceeds by first constructing abnormalities (development categories such as "the illiterate" or "the poor") and then attempts to reform these abnormalities through technical solutions (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994; Li 2007; Mitchell 1995).[35] They argue that these "abnormalities" development agencies identify are primarily shaped by solutions they know they can deploy.

Li (2007) argues that the implementation of development programs has two key steps: first, the problematization and second, the "rendering technical" and simultaneously apolitical (7).[36] She suggests that "programs of improvement are always shaped by political economic relationships they can't change; constituted that is by what they exclude" (Li 2007, 4). Ferguson, Mitchell, and Li's accounts emphasize that the framing of the problem and solution in improvement schemes inevitably screens out what Li (2007)

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calls political-economic questions—the ownership of means of production and the structures that support systemic inequalities (11). Li does not attribute the recasting of political-economic questions into technical questions to a hidden agenda necessarily. Instead, she suggests that often it is well-intentioned people who run development projects. The question, then, is how these agents try to balance the interests of various sections involved in the projects and how they come to decisions that "depoliticize" development (Li 2007; Mosse 2004), i.e., dismiss the role of power relations and politics in a process. The focus, they suggest, needs to be on the contestation and negotiation through which problem statements are crafted and technical solutions adopted.

Corbridge et al. (2005) also find that development projects offer technical solutions to political problems and that they seldom achieve their objectives of poverty alleviation or other change. However, they disagree that such projects always end up strengthening the dominant sections of society. They suggest, instead, that development projects and schemes may equally open up spaces for contestation and political engagement, even when they do not intend to. For this reason, Corbridge et al. recommend studying not just *how* problems and solutions are framed in the course of setting up and operating a planned initiative but also their operation in practice. Furthermore, it is important to examine how the conceptualization/design of an initiative and its operation shape each other, and what kinds of politics each enables or disables.

While development theorists have repeatedly demonstrated how concepts and artefacts can de- and repoliticize development, the role of information has rarely been studied in this regard, even though, for a while now, it has been a part of the discourse of development and of poverty alleviation schemes—quite central to them, in fact, as I showed in prior sections.[37] There has been little critical analysis of the term itself[38] (or of its various local equivalents, where they exist at all), or of the politics of its circulation in the Indian context.[39] Most existing analyses of the term information discuss domains and geographies other than poverty alleviation and the Global South.[40] Meanwhile, analyses of information-based development projects or social change initiatives in the Global South—a large proportion of which originates in the information and communication technologies and development (ICTD) space—typically focus on the 'T' of ICTD.[41] While there is now plenty of work that has critically examined the implications of

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ICTD initiatives for different sections of a population, even that work tends to take the 'I' of ICTD for granted. In the rare instances where attention has been paid to information in this space, it has mostly focused on categorizing different kinds of information that are pertinent in a specific context, the various roles (functional and analytical) that information can usefully fulfil (Grimshaw 2011), and more recently, on identifying the implications and categories of 'mis' and 'dis' information (Ahinkorah et al. 2020; Akbar and Pal 2020; Haque et al. 2020). However, the reification of information and the underlying assumptions about it that animate the design of several ICTD projects—that it exists out there as an entity, that it has value, or that it empowers (as long as it is relevant, and true)—have not been the object of much analysis.

## THE POLITICAL LIVES OF INFORMATION: FRAMEWORK AND QUESTIONS

Toward changing this and taking a leaf from the depoliticization literature discussed earlier, this book examines what work the framing of development as an informational problem does. When the "problem" is framed as the poor "lacking information," with access to information as its "informational solution," what is highlighted and what obscured? Do informational solutions push efforts at finding political solutions to poverty to the background? Alternatively, do informational solutions also offer spaces for negotiation and political engagement? These are the questions this book hopes to address by investigating the role of informational solutions in the definition and practice of poverty alleviation, development, and social change.

The book will make two distinctive contributions at the intersection of critical information studies and development studies. First, in the tradition of intellectual histories of development terms and technologies (Harriss 2002; King and McGrath 2004; Roy 2010), this book will examine information and its political implications for poverty alleviation efforts. To do this, instead of treating information as a given, I begin by examining what the reification of information as a well-understood, bounded object has obscured and what it has made possible in the cases I study. The book's second contribution is the range of cases it studies in order to theorize how these ideologically diverse initiatives were able to leverage this one term and idea in their distinct efforts at poverty alleviation and social change. In contrast to

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accounts that examine information by studying its circulation in structurally and ideologically coherent entities or spaces, such as a specific market, bureaucracy, or project,[42] my book explores the varied ways in which ideologically diverse actors have conceptualized information in their work. The spectrum of its cases, thus, enables this book to address a question that has not been attempted so far: what has made it possible for information to be widely appropriated across the political spectrum of such efforts? Reifying information has made it possible to make universalistic claims about it, allowing it to circulate as a theme that a diverse range of organizations and initiatives can rally around. But the reification of information has simultaneously made invisible the politics involved in the creation, usage, and valuation of all that is simply labeled information. The diverse ways in which these tensions and tradeoffs are resolved, and their implications for varied poverty alleviation, development, and social change efforts, are at the heart of this book.

The first step in studying the diverse "political lives" of information is to unpack information: to examine how the meaning and value of information draw from the particular social relations it is embedded in, rather than ascribing it an intrinsic value from the start.[43] A second step in identifying the ways in which information is made socially valuable is to fashion a lens that will enable studying the circulation of information in accounts of development and social change in this way. Both these steps build on existing (but all too rare) work on the "social life" and roots of information (Agre 1995; Bayly 2000; Brown and Duguid 2000; Jessop 2007; Schiller 1988; Scott 1998), which I will examine in greater detail in the next chapter. From these works, historian Christopher Bayly's in particular, I borrow the construct of an "information order" that he defines as a social-technological formation that is neither a completely physical infrastructure nor only the social networks in which information products circulate (Bayly 2000, 3).

Bayly's information order construct is useful for three reasons in examining the questions that interest me. First, it treats the institutions of information collection and diffusion, including state intelligence networks, social communication networks, communication technologies, and knowledgeable people, as important for social and economic change in a community. Second, Bayly allows nevertheless that such an information order is embedded in a social context and is itself a social formation. In the face of a popular view of information as autonomous and intrinsically valuable, I value this

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construct for its recognition of the social meaning of information. Finally, Bayly sees an information order not as a thing but as a heuristic that is useful in analyzing certain phenomena, in my case the depoliticization of development and social change.

As I describe in greater detail in chapter 2, I modify the construct of an information order to have it include the information systems, laws, procedures, documents, and records that frame such interactions, as well as the physical and social infrastructure (Elyachar 2010) that is made use of in the course of interactions. With this lens in hand, I examine three cases to analyze the circulation of information and their practice of poverty alleviation work. The first case focuses on a fish market in the Indian state of Kerala and on claims that mobile phones improved its functioning by making price information easily accessible to fishermen. The second case is of the internet-enabled village "information shops" set up by a nonprofit in the late 1990s to facilitate residents' interactions with the state in Puducherry. The third case examines the campaigns of a people's movement for a right to information in Rajasthan in the 1990s. These campaigns demanded that paper records detailing the implementation of the state's welfare schemes be made available for public scrutiny. The immediate goals, actors involved, the information technology deployed, and the political ideology underpinning each case differed. Yet, information was pivotal to each. How did this come about, what did information mean in each case, and how did it work in practice? These are the questions I explore in the rest of the book based on ethnographic and archival research carried out over roughly 15 months in 2009 and 2012, and a follow-up visit in 2016.

## BOOK STRUCTURE

Following this chapter and its examination of the history and implications of information in development, chapter 2 fleshes out the information order framework in more detail, describes my methodology, and introduces the three sites of my inquiry. It presents the rationale for conducting a relational comparison to address my research questions (Hart 2002, 2006). Instead of focusing on the differences between my cases as a given, a relational comparison allows me to ask how these differences were produced (Gupta and Ferguson 1997)—for example, how each case came to the term information and decided to use it in radically different ways. My relational comparison

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of the three cases helps address two questions: how information worked differently in each case and how, at the same time, it proved central for cases as different as these three. Thus, chapter 2 provides a more detailed description of my cases and how I studied them, while also highlighting my reasons for choosing such diverse cases.

Chapter 3 digs deep into how each of the three cases conceptualized information and how their conceptions evolved over time. Drawing on archival material, project documentation, and interviews, it moves case by case to examine how information was conceptualized: as abstract, particularistic, or both; as having specific properties or leading to specific outcomes; and the nature of its entanglement with social relations and material form. The chapter does this by laying out the history and context within which each case and its conception of information unfolded. Thus, in the Kerala case, the chapter maps out the world of price information systems shaped by economist Robert Jensen's influential article on price information and mobile phone use among Kerala's fishers before examining the understanding of information it engenders (Jensen 2007). In the project set up by Swaminathan Foundation, it examines how concerns about funding and logistics shaped the form the information village project took. In looking at MKSS's campaigns for information, it explores how earlier campaigns shaped the group's outlook on information. The chapter shows the divergent conceptions of information deployed in the three cases and lays the groundwork for understanding how these worked in practice, which is the substance of chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Chapter 4, "Constructing Efficient Markets with Mobile Phones and Price Information," describes my revisit to the site of a popular study that examined the role of price information in fish markets in Kerala (Srinivasan and Burrell 2015). Widely covered by academic and popular press, the study by economist Robert Jensen claimed that the introduction of mobile phones had improved the welfare of the average producer and consumer of fish in Kerala by allowing for the sharing of price information and the reduction of overall price dispersion and wastage (Jensen 2007). I use the case—the study and responses to it—as an example where the emphasis on information ends up demoting—even denying—the role of politics. Where Jensen's work had emphasized the use of phones by male fishers to gauge market price information, we studied the social relations within which these interactions took place and the practices of less visible members of the fishing supply chain—women, small-scale fishers, and vendors. Far from the depiction

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of price as emerging naturally and of price information as a neutral economic input, I show how price was produced in practice and how the circulation and value of price information was firmly tied to the nature of credit relations, the history of social movements organized by fishers, and even the geography of the region. Throughout, gender and class relations influenced the uses for phones, dictated the value of price information, and shaped the very definitions of welfare.

Unlike the market-driven logic of development that operated in chapter 4, chapter 5, "Crafting Informed Citizens at Village Information Centers," concerns the information-focused interventions of a research nonprofit. Established in Puducherry in 1998, Swaminathan Foundation's IVRP sought to improve livelihood opportunities for village dwellers of the region through the provision of market and government information. The project remained the poster child of digital technology-based poverty alleviation initiatives in the decade since. IVRP worked through ICT-based "information shops" equipped with computers and operated by people trained by the foundation. With the goal of improving the efficacy of interactions with the state, IVRP provided government information, including the rules and timelines of public entitlement schemes, at these shops. Animated by a desire to separate the project from politics, project personnel were instructed to keep their actions and announcements strictly separated from "politics": this case provides me an example where the goal was to bracket politics from information provision. My fieldwork showed how these information shops and their operators became involved in the verification of social facts for the state, were leveraged for petitioning the state, and were deemed irrelevant in arenas where they chose to stay away from politics. The shop, thus, operated in and through the political terrain of the village in its work of information provision. In the information village envisioned in the foundation's initial documents, "information production" and "information consumption" were distinct activities that could be impacted but were not fundamentally constituted by the range of politics operating in the village: the working of the information shop, I found, looked significantly different.

In contrast to the previous two cases, chapter 6, "Creating an Accountable State with Right to Information Campaigns" examines an explicitly political campaign that demanded information from the state. In the course of a campaign demanding minimum wages for workers in state-sponsored employment and relief schemes, MKSS, a collective of peasants and workers,

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challenged the discrepancies between documented wages and the wages actually paid to the workers participating in these schemes in the state of Rajasthan. MKSS also highlighted the obstacles that workers faced in accessing government documents. Its endeavor grew over the next few years to shape a statewide movement demanding a legal right for citizens to examine government documents. In conjunction with similar campaigns across the country, the MKSS's campaign resulted in the national Right to Information (RTI) Act in 2005, which provided citizens a way to access government records. MKSS's campaigns pitted the workers' oral version of what happened at a work site against the account provided by the official written records that the workers were not even allowed to see. In addition to this open confrontation, MKSS also lobbied through its connections in the bureaucracy to make government records accessible. Studying the history of the campaigns that led up to the first RTI rally in 1996 shows how MKSS made use of the ambiguity of the term information, and all that it could be used to refer to, to gain support from a variety of constituencies that did not usually make common cause, including village residents, politicians, bureaucrats, activists working on other concerns, journalists, and the urban middle classes.

Chapters 7 and 8 bring together threads from the previous chapters to compare the diverse ways in which the three cases of my focus conceptualized information and used it to rally support. In each case, referring to information as a well-defined object with intrinsic value made the specific politics of its creation, usage, and valuation invisible. Yet, politics shaped key differences in how information was defined and leveraged in practice by different target populations. These findings challenge popular claims that locate value in information rather than in the processes and politics through which it is leveraged. The penultimate chapter illustrates how thinking in terms of "information orders," in contrast, can allow us to pay attention to these processes and politics. Leveraging the information order construct and highlighting key phases in the life of information in each of my cases, the chapter analyzes what is meant by information, how it is produced, and who can leverage it, thus repoliticizing our understanding of poverty and development. The chapter highlights the central role played by the information narrative adopted in each case in shaping the information order. In wrapping up, it points to the role and range of politics encapsulated in each case.

The concluding chapter digs deeper into the varied politics of each case, that included more organized and visible efforts, and others that were closer

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to a "politics of stealth" using less visible mechanisms. This chapter also examines the tension between framing information in universalistic terms to gain support and having to make it work within a particular constellation of social relations. Based on that analysis, the chapter goes on to raise broader questions around the politics of de- and re-contextualization that is entailed in fashioning information as a development tool and whether that inevitably creates its own set of mediators and centers of control. The book closes with potential directions for future research.

## CONCLUSION

The UN ECA executive secretary's idea that "information empowers," at the beginning of this chapter, is alive and well twenty years after he uttered it. This book seeks to investigate claims such as his and examine their working in practice in the context of initiatives for social change. More specifically, its goal is to understand the varied ways in which information has been leveraged by ideologically distinct entities (because of the term's "striking blandness" or perhaps in spite of it) and their consequences for the politics of development and social change. In so doing, the book examines how development and change themselves are imagined and produced with information as a tool.

To achieve its objectives, this book moves away from treating information as self-standing and as inevitably or universally valuable. Training an information order lens on three information-focused initiatives in India, it attempts to bring back attention to the role of specific social structures and individual agency in the defining, production, and leveraging of information in practice. As a first step in operationalizing this work, chapter 2 presents a detailed description of the framework, methods, and sites on which the argument of this book is built.

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# 2

# OF FRAMEWORKS, METHODS, AND SITES

## INTRODUCTION

If chapter 1 laid out my conceptual reasons for studying information-based development efforts, this short chapter will flesh out how I operationalized this study, detailing the framework, methods, and sites my study is built around. Chapter 1 proposed that I study the diverse "political lives" of information to get at my questions and suggested two steps that would help me undertake such a study: unpack information to understand how it is made socially valuable, and fashion a lens that will enable such a study of the circulation of information in development and social change efforts. I subsequently identified an "information order" as a useful construct for achieving these objectives. The first half of this chapter examines the idea of an information order and its utility for this study in greater depth. In the second half of the chapter, I describe my research methodology, the three research sites where I deployed the information order lens, and my methods.

## UNPACKING INFORMATION WITH INFORMATION ORDERS

Chapter 1 highlighted a prevalent view of information in development discourse and practice that reifies information and views it in largely economic terms. Jessop (2007) poses a challenge to this view, instead examining what I am calling the social roots of information. Following Marx (1976 [1867]) and Schiller (1988), he argues that the economic value of things derives not from some immanent, eternal quality of the thing. It derives rather from contingent, historically specific social relations. Jessop uses this understanding to argue that knowledge and information have no intrinsic value; rather, they derive their value from the social relations they are embedded in. To treat them as commodities or goods that have their own intrinsic value would require disembedding them from these relations. He argues, in fact, that knowledge

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is the fourth "fictitious commodity" after land, labor, and money within a Polanyian framework: that it was not created originally with the purpose of being transacted in a market and that, therefore, assuming that it will behave like other commodities (in its supply, demand, and how it is valued) is a fallacy (Jessop 2007; Polanyi 2001 [1944]).

While Jessop's discussion is primarily concerned with knowledge and intellectual property rights, I suggest that his discussion can be usefully extended to information insofar as information is also embedded in social relations and derives its value from them (Jessop 2007; Schiller 1988). For instance, questioning what information even is, Agre has gone on to argue that "Information is at best a superficial generic term for a broad range of categories whose forms can be described in terms of genres but *whose nature can ultimately only be understood within a larger system of structural relationships and ideologies*" (Agre 1995, 227–228 [italics mine]).

Instances of information-gathering initiatives and of attempts at reengineering information flows support the idea that information derives its value from the social relations it is embedded in. Scott's (1998) accounts of information gathering by the state in early modern Europe for the purposes of taxation and military conscription emphasize how difficult the process was for agents of the state. The agents wished to collect social facts that would help them determine who owed the state taxes or from where to recruit manpower for the military. The state's measurement units were seldom aligned with local ways of measuring a fact. People also resisted these measurements because their interests were not aligned with those of the state. Consequently, the population was illegible to the state, and, to the extent that the state fit information into categories and units of its own choosing, information was either transformed or ended up being "fictional shorthand" (24). In this way, Scott's account also emphasizes how the meaning and value of information draws from the social relations within which it is created and used. When they argue that information has a social life, Brown and Duguid (2000) make a similar point about the definition, value, and nature of information in organizations ranging from universities to businesses. They further point out that not accounting for the social life of information can have unintended consequences, including the disruption of existing practices that may not have been formalized but were nevertheless productive.

Bayly's (2000) study of the 1857 uprising against the British in India speaks more specifically of the importance of socially trusted but informal

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channels and practices of information circulation. While the British East India Company (EIC) had made great efforts to tap formal channels of information circulation for its intelligence, Bayly argues that there were gaps between these formally mandated channels of gathering intelligence and the pre-existing social networks, channels, and practices that revolutionaries were able to leverage. These informal channels eventually proved critical in the spread of the uprising in Indian cities, while the EIC's focus on formal channels blinded it to what was happening on the ground. Bayly's account emphasizes the importance of networks of information circulation and how the same information may mean something completely different to an outsider than it does to a member of a social network. To make his argument, Bayly introduces a construct he calls an "information order"—described as an assemblage and arrangement of information systems, channels, forms, and agents of communication—to focus on how information draws its value and meaning from the social relations in which it is embedded and the channels through which it circulates. Using this heuristic to analyze the 1857 revolution, Bayly shows that it was the gap between the information order put in place by the British and the one used by the locals that allowed the uprising to succeed to the extent that it did.

In crafting this construct, Bayly (2000) argues that information and knowledge are typically not taken seriously in analyses of historical events and social change, with the "generators of knowledge, the institutions of information collection and diffusion, and the discourse associated with them" often reduced to "the status of contingencies of late industrial capitalism or the modern state" (4). Bayly found this an unproductive approach because it could not account for differences between societies in the same time period or geography that nevertheless followed very different trajectories of social transformation. Bayly advocates instead for an approach that would treat entities associated with information circulation as "autonomous forces for social and economic change" (4). He finds inspiration in Castells's (1989) work on the role of information technologies in shaping economic and social life in the late twentieth century, for instance, and sees that as one way of placing information at the forefront.

Bayly has a further critique of the way information and knowledge are treated in accounts of social change. He finds the centrality accorded to the (Foucauldian and Saidian) themes of "knowledge is power" and orientalism in these accounts problematic. While Bayly does not disagree with the

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importance of either theme, he argues that by treating state and colonial knowledge as monoliths, these discourses actually end up obscuring "the variety of localised engagements between knowledge and power" that were possible and that did take place (143). As an example, he points to the inability of the British colonial enterprise in India—despite the many formal channels of intelligence gathering it had instituted—to tap into informal networks of information diffusion and the inadequacy of its affective or patrimonial knowledge in its anticipation and handling of the 1857 uprising (167). To Bayly, this shows how the emergence of systems of knowledge could also reflect "weaknesses of power and legitimacy" (25) rather than always being about the powerful. In his account, "knowledgeable people" were not always the intelligence gatherers employed by the British but included people with everyday knowledge in particular domains of work and expertise.[1] Bayly sees such institutions and people as important enough to merit separate analyses rather than being relegated to some residual category of the overall analysis of knowledge (4). The heuristic of an information order was constructed to address these two lacunae in how information and knowledge (Bayly uses both terms in his argument, though he distinguishes between them at the outset) are dealt with in theories of social change.

For these reasons, Bayly (2000) makes the assemblage and arrangement of information systems, as well as channels, forms, and agents of communication, central to his analysis of historical events. He treats an information order "as a type of social formation rather than as a simple adjunct to existing economic forces or a neutral technological process" (4). While "not separate from the world of power or economic exploitation," Bayly imagines an information order as standing "both prior to it and dependent on it" (4). At the same time, by according attention to a variety of channels, forms, and agents of communication, he attempts to move away from treating the colonial system of knowledge and information systems as monolithic formations that always go hand in hand with power. In so doing, his attempt is to allow for visibility into more "localized engagements" between power and knowledge (143).

## REMAKING INFORMATION ORDERS

From Bayly I borrow this fundamental idea of a social-technological formation that is neither completely physical infrastructure nor only the social

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networks in which information products circulate. But I also depart from this formation and modify it in significant ways to make my arguments. While Bayly applies this concept to colonial India as a whole for his purposes, I consider multiple information orders in different parts of present-day India. Further, and unlike Bayly, my use of the heuristic is in the context of an independent welfare state, albeit with a colonial past. Bayly uses two information orders in his analysis—the state intelligence networks of the British and the social communication networks of Indians—to make the argument that the gaps between these orders allowed the 1857 revolution to happen. Unlike Bayly, I use a composite information order to cover a population's interactions with the state, market, and civil society. The reason for using a composite order is both because of the shift in historical context (that is, from a colonial government to an elected and indigenous government whose links with the population were of a different nature) and because of my (consequent) focus on the interactions and connections—rather than on gaps—between a population and a state, market, or civil society. Thus, while Bayly's framework of an information order covers a larger geography and is analytically separate for a state and its population, mine is focused on a place but is a composite that is defined to include both a population and the entities it interacts with in a single social formation. Accordingly, the information order of a place, as I define it, includes the information systems, laws, procedures, documents, and records that frame such interactions, as well as the physical and social infrastructures that are made use of in the course of such interactions.[2]

Another important addition that I make to Bayly's idea is the introduction of the material form of information products as a factor in how such an order works. While Bayly pays attention to the existence of different information products, communication technologies, and infrastructure in his work, he nevertheless treats material form as external to the definition of information and does not emphasize its importance in shaping the very meaning associated with the information in question. Unlike Bayly, I take material form seriously in my analysis, making it intrinsic to my analysis of how documents, records, and other products are understood and used.

Bayly's emphasis on information also points to a more fundamental question in the context of this book: what are people referring to when they talk about information?[3] I pay careful attention to this question, including the distinction between information and knowledge. Bayly (2000) sees information as "observations perceived at a relatively low level of conceptual

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definition, on the validity of whose claims to truth people from different regions, cultures and linguistic groups might broadly agree" (3). Though he talks about both information and knowledge in his analysis of information orders, he nevertheless does distinguish between the two at the outset: thus, in contrast to information, he defines knowledge as "socially organized and taxonomized" (4). In the context of the information-focused initiatives I examine, I explore how Bayly's distinctions and definitions play out in practice. In other words, how exactly does the "localized engagement" between information, knowledge, and power that concerns Bayly take place in the context of information initiatives focused on poverty alleviation, development, and social change?

## OF LEARNING FROM THREE INFORMATION ORDERS: METHODS AND SITES

This book deploys the construct of an information order to examine three prominent cases and understand how information was deployed differently—and with varied implications—in each. My examination of the cases and subsequent analyses are not framed as a traditional comparative analysis of the outcomes across cases. Nor are the cases treated as variations of an ideal type. Structured instead as a relational comparison, I use the cases to ask how the differences between them were produced, rather than focusing on these differences as a given (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Hart 2002, 2006). Since a relational comparison does not involve pre-given bounded cases and tries to understand how the different cases are constituted in relation to one another (Hart 2006), such a comparison is especially useful where the goal is to understand the varied but interconnected workings of the same concept and allied terms in different geographies and spaces. In this research, deploying a relational comparison allowed me to investigate how each case came to the term information and then understood its use in distinct ways. What factors enabled these differences?

To address these questions in the most effective way, I chose cases whose underpinning ideologies and visions for social change were drastically different—as were the geographical regions they operated in—even as they converged on the idea of information as critical to the process of change. The first case I examined was of the circulation of price information among fishing communities in Kerala. Based on his research on mobile phone use

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to share price information among fishers in the south Indian state of Kerala in the late 1990s and early 2000s, economist Robert Jensen proposed that the introduction of mobile phones was improving fishers' incomes and welfare (Jensen 2007). Jensen's research has since been very influential in linking the availability of information and ICTs to the better functioning of markets and increased incomes. The second case I studied was an information village project, the IVRP, initiated by a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), the M. S. Swaminathan Foundation, in 1998 in Puducherry in south India. This project hinged on the idea that providing information to village communities at digitally enabled information kiosks had the potential to improve their livelihoods. My third case concerned the RTI campaigns in Rajasthan in northern India in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Here, a political movement called MKSS established a link between information and government accountability as a step toward more secure livelihoods. The circulation of price information in Kerala, the Swaminathan Foundation's information villages, and MKSS's contributions to the RTI campaign provide an opportunity for a historical analysis of how information has been used differently as a thing and as a term in these prominent cases. These specific cases are important also because they are often leveraged as pioneers or exemplars that established the importance of information in effecting social change.[4]

I spent between four and five months each with the fishers in Kerala (in 2012 and 2016), the IVRP unit of the Swaminathan Foundation (in 2009), and MKSS (in 2009). My research used a combination of archival work, participant observation, and interviews. It was conducted in Malayalam (in Kerala, with a translator), Tamil (in Kerala and in Puducherry), Hindi (in Rajasthan), and English (in all three locations), with most interviews and some archival documents using a combination of two languages. Throughout the research process, my identities as a woman, a student, a researcher affiliated with an American university and funded by American grants at the time, and as a Tamilian of a dominant caste who grew up in Delhi (that is, in an urban rather than a rural region, and in northern rather than southern India), affected what and who I had access to, how I interacted with my informants and interviewees, and how they perceived me. Instead of seeing this as a drawback or trying not to "affect" what I studied, I used a reflexive model to frame my research.

The exact combination of methods I used for each case varied. For the Kerala fishers' case, I conducted fieldwork in 2012 and 2016 at fish landing

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centers in south and north Kerala (Thiruvananthapuram and Kozhikode districts). This fieldwork consisted of direct observation of fish auctioning and selling practices at beach and city fish markets, including the use of mobile phones in the process. Spending time at the beach auctions in these two different regions of Kerala allowed me to identify the range of actors involved in the auctions there as well as the ways in which price information circulated.

I then conducted formal interviews and unstructured conversations (about one hundred overall) with individuals and groups of people who worked across the full range of the fishing supply chain in that region, including investors, auctioneers, fishers who owned boats, fishers who worked on other people's boats, buyers who bought wholesale, others who liaised with fish meal factories or operated as export agents, and small-scale fish vendors (operating on bike and foot, male and female). I spoke with employees of fishers' cooperatives (both fisher-organized and those affiliated with the government-run Matsyafed) and to members of fishers' unions at both the state and village level. I reached out to experts and researchers, some of whom also identified as activists. I also examined publications by the government, fishers' cooperatives, and unpublished research papers on the history and process of fish sales in the state.[5]

In the case of the IVRP, I spent time at the various nodes where the project functioned: the IVRP headquarters at the main Swaminathan Foundation office in Chennai, the regional Village Resource Centre (VRC or hub) in Puducherry district, and different Village Knowledge Centres (VKCs) in villages of the district. The IVRP was far from being a monolithic entity and functioned differently at these levels. The perception of information and development was also different at each level, making it important to study variations across this range of sites. Participant observation involved spending time at a conference organized by the Swaminathan Foundation in Chennai,[6] attending meetings of IVRP personnel, hanging out at the VKCs during the hours they were in operation, and visiting residences and public spaces in two villages with VKCs that I had chosen for detailed study. In addition, fieldwork also involved teaching a computer class at a village school.[7] Overall, I spoke to around one hundred individuals, about half of them currently or at some point associated with the project at the hub or VKC level, a few government functionaries at the village level, and a number of village residents in both villages, some of whom were users of VKCs.

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My observations also informed my study of archival documents about the establishment of the project at the hub and at the Chennai headquarters.

Of all the time I spent with the IVRP, I spent the most time in two villages, Kilipet and Pudupattinam, where the earliest VKCs had been set up. Of these I present my study of Kilipet in this book.[8] I stayed in Chennai while conducting research at the headquarters, in the city of Pondicherry in Puducherry district while picking villages for in-depth study, and in a village in Puducherry district while conducting the in-depth village studies. The choice of a village to stay in was difficult and was finally based on the following reasoning. I found that I did not have many choices of stay within villages—those who would be willing and comfortable to have me stay with them tended to be the wealthier or powerful (mostly both) residents [the village council (panchayat) president, for example].[9] If I had accepted these offers for accommodation and conducted research in the same village where I lived, I was certain that there would be aspects of the politics in the village that would be completely inaccessible to me. At the same time, I realized that living in a village in the region would provide me an understanding of the place that I could not obtain from living in the city of Pondicherry. As a compromise, I found accommodation with a panchayat president's family in a village that I was not going to study in depth. Instead, using this village as my fixed point, I commuted daily to villages whose VKCs I had decided to focus on. In this way, I learned a lot about the region by living in a village there but reduced the barriers I would have faced if I had been seen as someone close to the local village president.

In the case of MKSS, I was attempting to dig into a history and narrative that had already been told many times at the time of my fieldwork (Bakshi 1998; Baviskar 2007; Jenkins and Goetz 1999; Mishra 2003; Singh 2007) and since (Pande 2014; Roy and MKSS Collective 2018; Sharma 2014, 2016; Singh 2011; Webb 2013).[10] In addition, my interest was mainly in the earlier stages of MKSS's campaigns, which had taken place between 1987 and 1996 (that is, fifteen to twenty years prior to my study). To arrive at the richest possible account of the campaign, I relied on a combination of participant observation, interviews, and archival work. This involved participating in the organization of a "public hearing" (explained later), an employment fair, a May Day workers' fair, various rallies, and public meetings that placed demands to the local and state governments, meetings with different levels

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of the government on the use of information technology in the administration of a public works scheme in the region, and helping set up a filing categorization system for MKSS.

Participant observation of MKSS's current work proved fruitful in several ways. First, spending a lot of time traveling and working with MKSS members allowed me to reach beyond the popular narrative of their campaigns and into details. It also provided me many leads in terms of people in the bureaucracy or the local press to talk to as well as archival resources I needed to look out for. Participating in events organized by MKSS allowed me to approach the past with an eye to what had changed and also provided me an opening to talk about similar events in the past.[11] Being a participant observer in 2009 helped me develop a sense of how MKSS's work had been translated into social facts and a particular narrative. That, in turn, helped me approach more people and look for a broader range of points of view on the campaigns that took place. Participant observation also allowed me to talk to more members than those typically targeted as MKSS's spokespeople by the press. Ultimately, I spoke to about forty people at length (and in most cases over multiple conversations) about the campaigns. These included MKSS members, other activists, those involved in the earlier public hearings in some capacity, and bureaucrats at the village, district, and state levels. While my attempts did not lead me to a significantly different narrative than the popular one, it nevertheless allowed me to appreciate how a wider range of people viewed these campaigns and their own role in them. Finally, traveling in the region where the RTI campaign took root, rather than spending all my time in archives, allowed me to go to the archives with some sense of the social experience of being in the region, though always aware that the region had not remained unchanged in the intervening period.

## CONCLUSION

Following chapter 1, where I presented my reasons for studying information-based development efforts, this chapter elaborated on how I went about studying them. I began the chapter by describing Bayly's information order construct and its utility in addressing my questions. I then explained how I would build on the construct and use it as a lens to examine exemplar cases of information use in development and social change efforts in India. With the lens in place, I laid out the rationale for organizing this study as a relational

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comparison and for the choice of the circulation of price information among fishing communities in Kerala, the Swaminathan Foundation's Information Village Research Project, and MKSS's RTI campaign as its three sites of study. Finally, I described how I went about operationalizing the study at the level of methods to adequately examine these three cases that operated in different geographical regions and had drastically varying ideologies and visions for development and social change, but converged on the idea of information as critical to that process of change.

In chapter 3, I will delineate the distinct trajectories that information took in these three cases. As a first step, the next chapter will outline the theoretical conception of information with which each of my cases was associated. In subsequent chapters, I will examine how information played out in practice in each.

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3

# FRAMING INFORMATION: ORIGINS AND CONCEPTIONS

## INTRODUCTION

Following the rationale for studying information in development in chapter 1 and a description of how I went about it in chapter 2, this chapter is a deep dive into the three cases around which this book is structured. More specifically, it explores the ways in which information was conceptualized in each case. Going from the price information case in Kerala to the IVRP in Puducherry and, finally, to MKSS's campaigns in Rajasthan, I identify whether information was treated as abstract or particularistic by each, the specific attributes and potential outcomes that each associated with information, and the relationship it envisioned between information, social structures, and material form.

A note before I start the journey across cases: In keeping with the vision of a relational comparison mentioned in chapter 2, neither this chapter nor the following three case chapters are symmetrically organized. The points of emphasis in each case are different, and I lay out each case in its own terms rather than squeezing all cases into a standard template. Furthermore, with the information order construct in mind, I implicitly pay attention to the assemblage and arrangement of information systems as well as the channels, forms, and agents of communication in my accounts in all four chapters. However, it is only in chapters 7 and 8 that I take up an explicit comparison of highlights across chapters using the information order framework.

## CASE 1: PRICE INFORMATION, MOBILE PHONES, AND THE FISHERS OF KERALA

### THE WORLD OF PRICE INFORMATION PLATFORMS

In the past decade, one of the most popular categories of initiatives in the field of ICTs and development has been the provision of price information

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to farmers and fishers using digital technologies. As I briefly discussed in chapter 1, for the better part of the twentieth century, mainstream economics has recognized that the closer markets are to conditions of perfect and symmetric information (i.e., all actors have access to the same information), the better they function. Furthermore, even economists who highlighted that relevant information will always be dispersed among different individuals (i.e., there may never be symmetry) argued that markets and market mechanisms—rather than state planning—presented the most efficient way to bring together this disparate information for decision making (Hayek 1945).[1] Nowhere has the enthusiasm for symmetric information and for market mechanisms converged more visibly than in the popularity of price information initiatives for farmers and fishers operating in agricultural markets. The rationale driving the burgeoning support for such endeavors goes something like this: Farmers and fishers, particularly in low-income regions and countries, lack information pertaining to growing and selling their crops. More narrowly defined, they are unlikely to have easy access to information on potential markets for their produce and the prevailing prices for their produce in different markets. Leveling information asymmetries between farmers on the one hand and experts, middlemen, or buyers on the other was perceived to be a significant step that would reduce their transaction costs (search costs, for instance) and increase farmers' and fishers' bargaining power. This, in turn, would improve the livelihoods of farmers and fishers.

The centrality of price information in development discourse has shaped both policy priorities and design approaches to digital solutions for low-income farmers and other rural agriculturalists in the twenty-first century (Aker 2010; Burrell and Oreglia 2015; Grimshaw and Kala 2011; Wyche and Steinfeld 2015). Price information platforms and services abound in a variety of forms, some exclusively focusing on price information and others offering price information as one among several services. Earlier attempts worked through telecenter-based models. Prominent examples of this model include the ITC's e-Choupal project that offered soya prices in Madhya Pradesh, India (Kumar 2016) and the Ningxia ICT project in China that offered agricultural information including price and wellness information (Fengying et al. 2011). Mobile phones have since emerged as a device of choice for several academic, government-backed, and corporate attempts at providing price information in different parts of the world (Aker 2010; Baumüller 2015; Fafchamps and Minten 2012; Islam and Grönlund 2010; Lokanathan, de Silva,

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and Fernando 2011; Nakasone 2013; Wyche and Steinfeld 2015; Ziegler et al. 2019). Prominent price information platforms, apps, and services include (or have included at some point in the past few years) Esoko,[2] Marketplace,[3] MFarm,[4] Nokia Life Tools,[5] RML Information Services Pvt. Ltd. (formerly known as Reuters Market Light),[6] and USAID's Market Information Systems and Traders Organizations in West Africa (MISTOWA),[7] all of which count market price information among their product offerings.

Many such recent initiatives draw on exemplars of research on the use of mobile phones in obtaining price information when they motivate their work. Some academic works that have offered an empirical basis for a faith in price information as an improver of livelihoods stand out in this regard. That is why, for my first case, I examine one of the earliest and most cited among such works:[8] economist Robert Jensen's work on the relationship between the availability of price information using digital technologies and improved incomes among fishermen of Kerala (Jensen 2007). This work has been critical to the growth of claims related to price information especially in the ICTD community both within academia and with designers of price information systems (Srinivasan and Burrell 2015).[9] Unlike the other two cases I address in this chapter, where I examine the conceptions of information adopted by the founders of a project and a campaign, here I analyze the conception of information that has been popularized by this particular analysis of the Kerala fishers. Since the introduction of mobile phones among fishers in Kerala was not a planned initiative run by a single institution, I find an examination of Jensen's much cited analysis the most effective entry point to understand the origins of the conception and attributes increasingly associated with information in this category of ICTD initiatives.

Jensen's research focused on fish auctions taking place on the north Kerala coast between 1996 and 2001. More specifically, he studied how the price of fish at these auctions shifted with the introduction of mobile phones in the region. Based on weekly surveys of the sale and purchase of fish in fifteen beach markets in this period, Jensen notes that before the introduction of phones, the only way fishers could gauge prices at a market was by traveling to that market, which resulted in high search costs. To avoid that, fishers ended up selling at the beach market that was closest to them regardless of the price there. Jensen argues that with the introduction of phones, fishers used their mobile phones to find the market that had the best available price for fish and then traveled to that market to sell their fish. Buyers, meanwhile, used

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their phones to gauge fish supply and price and came to the appropriate markets to buy fish. The overall efficiency of the market improved with the better matching of supply and demand for fish, a reduction in price dispersion, and the elimination of waste. This, in turn, raised profits for everyone. The paper concludes by looking beyond price information alone to note that "information makes markets work, and markets improve welfare" (Jensen 2007, 919).

## INFORMATION IN JENSEN'S ACCOUNT

Jensen's account is largely focused on one kind of information: price information. It is only in closing that he talks about information in more abstract terms, suggesting that it is critical for the functioning of markets and, in turn, for increased earnings. Next, in Jensen's account, price emerges in accordance with the economic laws of supply and demand. Once determined in this way, price is treated as an objective fact that is transmitted from person to person, with or without ICTs. Also, the material form in which this price information circulates is peripheral to this conversation except with respect to efficiency and cost concerns. Thus, mobile phones proved important because prices could be shared on them faster than face to face. Beyond that, price information scrawled with chalk on a blackboard, price information that was orally communicated face to face, or price information received as a text message on a phone were not treated as fundamentally different in how each was perceived and used. Also, in terms of the implications of price information, most of this work has focused on efficiency outcomes and aggregate incomes; the distribution of these benefits within a population, if covered at all, was indirect and accounted for through spillovers. For instance, in Jensen's account, while he notes that large-scale fishing units were the only ones (at the time) that had phones, he argues that both large and small units realized increases in income as a result of a market that functioned better overall. The latter group, thus, experienced the (spillover) benefits of better information circulation despite the limited and skewed ownership of phones.

Social relations and the material form of information are noticeably absent in Jensen's narratives of how information circulates.[10] In chapter 4, I will examine how price information circulates in practice among the fishers of Kerala and how socio-material relations strongly shape these circuits and their implications for various categories of fishers. But before that, I step back a decade and a half from 2007 to outline my second case: that of the

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Swaminathan Foundation in Chennai, which was thinking seriously about the role of information in its work on improving rural livelihoods in 1992.

## CASE 2: THE SWAMINATHAN FOUNDATION'S INFORMATION SHOPS IN PUDUCHERRY VILLAGES

> Other things being equal . . . how much would new knowledge and new information make an impact on productivity, profitability and sustainability?
> —M. S. Swaminathan, founder of the Swaminathan Foundation, 1992

This question from 1992 set the tone for the IVRP that the foundation deployed later in the decade. Since its establishment in 1988 as an NGO in Chennai, the Swaminathan Foundation had worked on research and implementation in the domain of agriculture and sustainable development.[11] With the IVRP, the foundation sought to use information and ICTs in its work with rural communities in Puducherry in southern India.

As one of the very first ICTs for development projects in India, the pioneer status of the IVRP attracted coverage in the Indian and international press[12] as well as visitors from around the globe.[13] The project was also discussed in academic, NGO, and policy circles,[14] and honored with several awards[15] (Ofir and Kriel 2004, 1), making it an important information initiative to consider for the purposes of this book. Notwithstanding their common focus on information, the IVRP also differed in significant ways from the Kerala case examined previously. While the Kerala case emphasized the role of information in markets, the IVRP's focus was on the role of information in interacting with the state and for livelihoods more broadly conceived. Additionally, the IVRP case hinged on the role of a civil society organization, rather than on market mechanisms, in achieving conditions of symmetric information.

### THE CRAFTING OF THE IVRP (1992–1997)

The idea for the IVRP can be traced back to the interdisciplinary "Dialogue on Information Technology" meeting from January 1992 at which M. S. Swaminathan, renowned scientist and founder of the foundation, made the comments I started this section with.[16] The IVRP came from a vision that sought to bring the "information age" to the "information poor."[17]

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The long-term goal of the endeavor was an "increase in skill-based rural employment in both farm and off-farm sectors with information technology and information-related services" (MSSRF 1993, 251).

Unique to the project at that time was its focus on information and its desire to set up information villages[18] where

> we can measure the impact of the knowledge and information input on the productivity, profitability and sustainability of the major farming systems of the village. Other things being equal, like land, labour, water and credit, how much would new knowledge and new information . . . make an impact on productivity, profitability and sustainability? (MSSRF 1993, 2)

The idea of an "information shop" surfaced in subsequent discussions on designing and operationalizing a pilot information village project:

> Each village, depending upon its size, will have one or more "information shops" which will be managed by educated unemployed/school teachers/students/women of the village. These managers of information shops will act as information seekers for the village and satisfy the information demands of the village. Being modelled along the lines of paan shops[19] . . . information shops convey the idea of villagers going down to the shop for purchasing information.
>
> Information seekers will obtain what they need from among a set of information resource centres using an appropriate communication medium . . . the resource centre essentially acts as a single-point source for all types of information products. The information resource centres will be fed by a set of information producers . . . information will be repackaged in such a way as to be most useful to the villagers. The specific content of the information package will be determined by the needs and requirements of the villagers. (MSSRF 1993, 2)

"Farm men and women, remote sensing centres, national information centres, government departments and institutions" were all identified as "information producers" for the information network, while the agricultural information needs of villagers were categorized into four groups based on the experiences of participants in the dialogue: market information, commercial information, land/water utilization information, and technical know-how.

Dr. V. Balaji, who later became the first project director of the IVRP, was key to translating the ideas on information villages into a funded project on the ground. In my interview with him, Balaji noted that the idea that information was critical to changing the lives of members of rural communities was "entirely to the credit of Swaminathan," who

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> assumed that biotechnology and information technology were going to be very big forces, shaping economics and socioeconomic development for several decades to come. He [Prof. Swaminathan] believed that biotechnology should go to villages and so should information technology. He always believed that his program, the one he directed at the Indian Agricultural Research Institute, was an information program. It had a strong element of dissemination. Scientists, instead of writing messages to farmers, did field demonstrations. It was not their field; it was the farmer's field. They encouraged people to visit [the field demonstrations]. On seeing results, the farmers were encouraged. After this, Swaminathan approached All India Radio; there was no Doordarshan [television channel] then to take the message across. Then the print media followed. He felt that information had played a huge role in the success of increased grain production, on what is now called the Green Revolution. That is when this idea came.[20]

While Balaji himself found information villages a "likeable idea," he "got no takers" for the project for several years after the 1992 dialogue. The IVRP finally became a reality when it received funding from the IDRC in 1997. Within the foundation, the thinking around information had continued in the intervening years, even as interest in information started to grow and intensify among development agencies in the 1990s. Meanwhile, certain changes within the IDRC in the 1990s might also partially explain why the IVRP caught its eye.

Between 1991 and 1997, IDRC president Keith Bezanson established a mandate to "become more audacious" by allowing research institutions to conduct their own research and, in turn, for them to empower the poor (Muirhead and Harpelle 2010, 211). With the spread of digital ICTs, the IDRC also started to emphasize the centrality of knowledge and information exchange in its own work, as well as encouraging it in the work of other development agencies (217). The focus on information and ICTs only deepened with programs such as Acacia in Africa (which sought to provide sub-Saharan communities the ability to apply ICTs to their own social and economic development) under the next president Maureen O'Neill, who took over in 1997. In parallel, the focus on measuring impact grew within the IDRC (317). Together, the focus on research, on information/ICTs, and on impact measurement made the IVRP a project of interest for the IDRC. But not before the vision for the IVRP was significantly reworked and fleshed out to align it to the IDRC's interests.

The project finally started taking shape when Balaji and his team received feedback that the proposed project in its existing form was just a

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development project. To be funded by organizations like the IDRC, what it needed was a research component. Taking this suggestion to convert the project into a researchable idea, the team wrote a proposal for funding an information village *research* project to the IDRC.[21] The funding proposal that the foundation finally submitted anticipated examining

> how enabling rural access to information using modern Information and Communication technologies, particularly email and web, can lead to generation and dissemination of location-specific knowledge that will be of use in production, marketing, employment generation and in improved utilization of entitlements for poverty alleviation. (MSSRF 1999b)[22]

What were the key priorities and vision that shaped the foundation's proposal and this plan for the IVRP? Interestingly, making available computer applications—which were relatively few in number and not the best quality—was not really a primary concern at this time. Instead, creating a system of information shops that was "locally intelligent" and relevant was a key priority. Connectivity and content were two components of such a system, and the IVRP proposed a hub-and-spokes model to address both.

Balaji confessed that from the beginning, he had been concerned about limited connectivity to the internet in villages. He further noted, "even if you connected them, it doesn't matter because that information is of no use to them." Here, Balaji also relied on communication theorist Heather Hudson's insights from her work on Latin American villages, which suggested that residents communicated most often with others in the region rather than those outside of it. He also pointed to the Indian experience. After all, he said,

> this was the time local newspapers were outstripping national newspapers. For example, *The Sunday Midday* [a local daily] in Mumbai was selling more than the [national daily] *Times of India*. It was printed in the afternoon, and you picked it up as you get into the train to head back home. It carried primarily local news, and people really wanted to know if there was a flood, whether their train would be delayed. So, I said, the model is there. Real hot-selling items are local. We should foster that. We should build on that understanding . . . I said we may not even need the internet in every village; simply have a connection to the hub, connectivity that makes people feel they can communicate with anyone they care.[23]

What was required, therefore, according to Balaji was "a hub here which receives inputs from the internet, it receives input from experts. Then you

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get a locally intelligent system which can connect to villages. Instead of the villagers always coming here, you now have a relevant point."[24] At this stage of the proposed project, Balaji and his team were thinking in the following terms:

information + value-addition = knowledge

The hub was where this value addition was to take place and thus became central in the imagination of the project. The hub or value-addition center (VAC) was where "hard technical data/information will be transformed to suit local queries or needs . . . Besides, information/data on developmental program (entitlements, credit, inputs etc.) and markets for a whole block of villages will be maintained here in this center" (MSSRF 1999b, 5). Situated at the block headquarters, the hub would have access to the internet. Information shops in villages of the block would, in turn, be connected to the hub. Thus, the hub could also act as a relay between information shops.

At the other end, the information shops were supposed to provide timely details pertaining to agriculture (e.g., costs and risks of seeds; market price; micro-meteorological particulars) and to maintain and update data on entitlements of rural families. This last was aimed toward helping village leaders assess gaps between the budgets or works sanctioned, and those delivered.

> The need for a reliable means for dissemination of accurate information on the entitlements from publicly funded poverty-alleviation schemes is critical. It has been emphasized that a considerable amount of financial resources get wasted because of avoidable duplication and non-demand by beneficiaries. Accurate information and its availability to the local elected institutions is known to alleviate this problem. Several state governments have recently enacted legislation to provide information on entitlements. The financial flow generated from such information will be critical capital in rural areas. This project will, therefore keep entitlements data in sharp focus as an important way ICT can contribute to poverty alleviation directly. (MSSRF 1999b, 4)

Individuals identified by local self-help groups and networks, and selected based on their sex, educational levels, socioeconomic status, and age, would operate these information shops on a semi-voluntary basis (MSSRF 1999b, 5). The foundation planned to train such operators in software and data gathering skills as well as in value addition: for instance, they would receive training on how to transform content derived from their wireless network, the internet, and CDs into local idiom (MSSRF 1999b, 7).

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Besides its focus on connectivity and content, the project's particular vision for its relationship and engagement with the village community also went on to crucially shape the vision for the IVRP (and later, its working on the ground). Balaji had faith in the strength and non-manipulability (by political parties) of traditional community organizations in Puducherry. His idea was to find a few such organizations and "hook on to them . . . I thought we should take the risk and move to the community." Thus, the IVRP was not based on a denial of politics; however, it decided to leave the politics for local community organizations to deal with.

Given the IDRC's focus on impact measurement, the IVRP's impact assessment strategies formed its final pillar. These strategies included a baseline survey examining the information needs, communication habits, and existing channels of information flow in the communities prior to the IVRP. Besides these parameters, the foundation was also interested in what it called the non-quantifiable issues such as the change in the attitude and response of the local development administration to an enhanced system of queries from the rural families once the IVRP was implemented. Further, since the project aimed to build a model for sustainable rural communication and information infrastructure, there was also a plan to collect data on users and usage patterns.

## SETTING UP THE IVRP IN PUDUCHERRY (1997–1999)

Based on its proposal,[25] the IVRP received funding for five years from the IDRC in 1997.[26] The plan was to set up six information shops; maintain, update, and disseminate "information on entitlements to rural families using an appropriate blend of modern and existing channels of communication"; and build "models of information dissemination and exchange in rural areas that uses advanced ICTs" (MSSRF 1999b, 2–3). A wireless network would be set up to link six hamlets, the Block Development headquarters, and the foundation's site office on both voice and data (MSSRF 1999b, 4). The site office itself would host locally relevant databases, have internet connectivity, and be located in Puducherry because of its strong local governance institutions and village-level awareness around technological interventions due to an earlier intervention in the region by the foundation.[27] Further, within Puducherry, the project was to be established in a block with access to good infrastructure and markets in the belief that "the greater the access to infrastructure, higher are the chances of novel components of

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infrastructure, such as telecom, becoming useful in a short time" (MSSRF 1999b, 3).

Over the next several months, the foundation set up a project office to plan and oversee the IVRP. It also set up a hub (VAC) and multiple spokes (information shops) in villages that were identified through a survey and that had asked for such shops. Further, the IVRP team also had to decide what value the hub could add, what its role would be in the working of the information shops, and what services a specific information shop could provide in its village. Finally, it set up mechanisms for the hub and information shops to interact regularly, including the technologies and processes involved.

The VAC or hub: The IVRP project office and the hub were co-located on premises established in February 1998 in Villianur, 8 km from the city of Pondicherry.[28] The hub had to be located such that it was easily visible to people to best market its services, and the premises in Villianur fulfilled this requirement.[29] The rented house out of which the hub operated was located at an important road junction close to the main bus stop (MSSRF 1999a). Furthermore, Villianur itself was a large town, an administrative node, and a prominent market center. As the communications hub and the center of a VHF star network, the Villianur office "talked" to all the peripheral stations or information shops.[30] As envisaged in the IVRP project document, it offered a mix of wired and wireless technologies for voice and data communication.[31]

In the early years, the personnel at Villianur were involved in developing and carrying out surveys and developing village databases based on them.[32] They also worked with the foundation's Chennai office to decide where information shops could be set up and helped establish these shops once the decision was made. They interacted daily with the personnel at the information shops once the shops were up and running. As part of the hub's value-addition mission, hub personnel translated content into Tamil and highlighted weather in specific regions of interest. They also made and maintained linkages with government departments and personnel when they decided to provide details of government schemes as part of the IVRP. With time, the hub created a variety of databases that were shared with the information shops. These included databases of below poverty line (BPL) lists, a list of entitlements under government schemes, public transport schedules, contact details of health practitioners and facilities, and prices of produce in association with Pondicherry Agro Service and Industries Corporation (PASIC). Hub personnel also created daily bulletins that

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consisted of price data received daily from PASIC and government notifications of relevance that were sent over VHF to the information shops. The hub also telephonically shared news such as details of transport delays with the shops. The information shops printed out these hub bulletins and displayed them along with news items of local relevance at the shop. The hub's final output was a monthly newsletter called *Namma Ooru Saidhi* (NOS) or "News from our village" that it compiled. NOS included local history, agricultural tips, and a listing of employment or educational opportunities. NOS also carried contributions from village residents, who had been seen as information producers even in the earliest proposals for the project. Collecting such items from residents was one of the many things the newly established information shops did on a daily basis.

Information shops: Once the hub was in place, the IVRP conducted surveys and participatory rural appraisals (PRAs) in 1997–98 to determine locations and relevant services for information shops. The two sets of surveys were to determine the extent of existing communication linkages between a village resident and other individuals or institutions in the region so that the hub and information shops could build on these linkages (MSSRF 1999a).[33] The first survey focused on the existing communication infrastructure of eleven villages.[34] The survey researchers concluded that there was considerable unmet need in these communities for infrastructure that would meet "coping style" communication needs. A second set of surveys assessed the existing patterns of communication of 450 families (MSSRF 1999a, 13). It found that for farmers, other farmers or "supralocal" entities such as input suppliers, money lenders, and traders remained the most important "sources of information"; these were labeled their strongest linkages as seen in figure 3.1.

The survey suggested that farmers' linkages with the Block Development Office (BDO) or agricultural officers (AOs) were weak, and that these offices or officials were seldom perceived to be "viable sources of information." The supralocal entities, however, had strong linkages with "external" entities such as government departments, universities, radio, or television. The only strong linkage between the farmers and an external entity was through the radio or television, but these were seen less as sources of development information and more as channels of entertainment. Thus, for farmers, linkages started and terminated in the supralocal realm almost entirely.[35]

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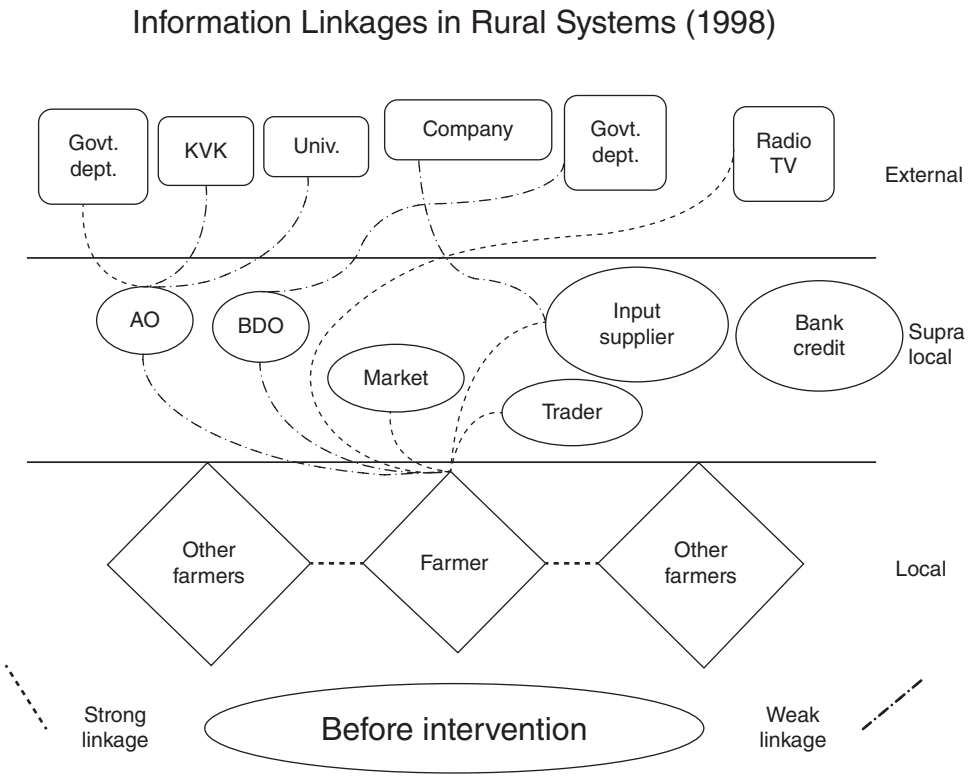


Figure 3.1
Survey-based mapping of "information linkages in rural systems" by the IVRP. KVK stands for Krishi Vigyan Kendra, a type of agricultural extension center. Source: Presentation designed by the hub staff and obtained from the hub by the author in August 2009. Adapted for readability. Also available in Kanungo (2001).

Based on findings from both sets of surveys, the survey researchers concluded that there was enough skill available in the villages to "introduce and internalize modern instruments of communication" since the same villages had accepted cable television easily (MSSRF 1999a, 14). Drawing further on the acceptance of cable TV, they concluded that even in conditions of poverty, "where information channels fulfil a felt need, the economic viability of the channel can be brought about." Finally, they concluded that a new information structure such as the one the IVRP proposed to introduce "must align itself" to the strong linkages between farmers and supralocal entities. Without this, the new system would have no credibility. Hence, the project

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personnel decided that the project would start by providing information at the local and supralocal levels.

In addition to the surveys, PRAs in thirteen villages also helped project personnel understand why an information shop may be needed in a village, where it could be located, how it could be made viable, and what sorts of services it should provide. A village hosted two PRAs before the Swaminathan Foundation made a commitment to set up an information shop in that village by signing an MoU with community representatives. Three more PRAs were conducted before a shop was actually established in that village.[36]

A wide variety of local bodies came forward over the years to ask the foundation for an information shop in their village. These included panchayats, temple trusts, women's SHGs, local cooperative unions, youth clubs, and a village development council. The premises offered to information shops were accordingly quite diverse, including panchayat buildings, temple premises, or, in one case, a building constructed with the information shop in mind. Among the earliest premises were private homes (IIITB 2005, v.8). However, the IVRP team was conscious from the start of caste and gender barriers and how these might shape the functioning of information shops.[37] Their experience during the setting up of the first information shops, especially the ones in private houses, reinforced their beliefs. They heard complaints about how shops in private homes restricted access, sometimes along caste lines.[38] Following a few such bad experiences, information shops were mostly set up on public land and in public buildings.[39]

The shops set up in different villages differed from each other in their assets, infrastructure, and premises. Besides being housed in public or private buildings, they could also be more or less furnished and also varied in size. However, they were all provided a minimum amount of equipment by the foundation: all shops had a PC, transceiver, printer, display board, interface to access a PSTN, and a modem for data transmission and receiving. In addition, the PC at the shop came loaded with all the databases developed at the hub. The shops could also borrow from a library of educational CDs available at the hub. Information shops in fishing villages had an electronic board that displayed weather conditions at sea. Most shops had a PA system that was used to read out important news items or job advertisements and deadlines. Since the dialogue on ICTs in 1992, the foundation had emphasized using multiple modes and channels of communication. The project was also not overly attached to high-tech solutions, using blackboards and

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loudspeakers when the IVRP deemed these "simple" technologies useful. These aspects have been frequently praised in the ICT and development community (Arunachalam 2002; Bhatnagar et al. 2003; IIITB 2005; Kanungo 2002) and rightfully so.[40]

But by 2009, much had changed in the decade-old project in Puducherry. As the regular funding from the IDRC dried up, the project had had to look beyond its goal of social sustainability and work toward financial sustainability. There had been a turnover of personnel at all levels of the project from the director down to information shop operators; also, new services had been introduced and older ones retired. In parallel, the project had expanded geographically and in terms of the number of information shops.[41] Puducherry's panchayat system had also changed, with the traditional panchayat finally being replaced by elected ones. The names of entities associated with the IVRP had changed as well. The VAC was renamed Village Resource Centre (VRC) and moved from Villianur in 2005.[42] Information shops were first known as saidhi grama maiyam in Tamil (and as village information centres in English). By the time I visited in 2009, they were called grama arivu maiyam in Tamil and village knowledge centres (VKCs) in English.[43] The volunteers who had earlier operated VKCs became known as knowledge workers (KWs) and also started receiving a nominal monthly salary. In addition to their other responsibilities, KWs were now expected to build relationships and seek the support of "boundary partners" and "strategy partners" in the working of their VKC. The boundary partners included notable people from the village community, such as panchayat leaders, people from local self-help groups or other committees, or ex-volunteers. Strategy partners tended to be companies or corporations like Microsoft and Intel who extended certification, financial help, or other sorts of strategic support to the project.[44] The changes in labels and responsibilities were as much a result of a need to rebrand the project as about reflecting lessons from the working of the information shops. For instance, "knowledge" was becoming increasingly important in development terminology, as were partnerships with technology and private players at about this time. Both trends were reflected in the changes embraced by the IVRP.

## INFORMATION IN THE IVRP

The IVRP's origin story, from the 1992 dialogue to the establishment of information shops in 1997, sheds light on how information was understood

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and deployed in those early stages of the IVRP.[45] I go on to show in chapter 5 that these early ideas fundamentally—though not completely—shaped what information shops in villages were able to achieve in practice.

One of the first things of note in this account is the moving between the abstract and particular senses of the term information (a possibility that I had outlined in chapter 1). In the 1992 dialogue, information was, on the one hand, an abstract term with a positive connotation.[46] On the other, it indicated a thing with a set of clearly defined properties that could be produced, categorized, bought, and sold. Demand for it could be identified and articulated, and it could also be an identifiable input in a process and its impact on productivity measured. The need for information was established by using it in the abstract sense (e.g., information as wealth, as power, or as constituting an "information age," all difficult claims to challenge because they were so broad), while the project could be operationalized by focusing on information in the second form (e.g., market prices and agricultural know-how). Especially since participants in the 1992 dialogue and in the project came from different domains and had potentially different understandings of information in the particularistic sense (for instance, a bureaucrat mentioned the politics of information while many others were talking about information in the context of weather systems and cropping practices), this ability to go back and forth made it possible to continue working together in spite of these differences. Information was thus "plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites" to qualify as a boundary object (Star and Griesemer 1989, 387).

Second, seeing information as a self-contained thing, and as a commodity that could be bought, sold, or act as an input in processes, enabled the IVRP to treat social and economic factors as external.[47] While the project definitely acknowledged that these factors were impacting how information was demanded, produced, transferred, and consumed, as external variables, these factors were *not* seen as fundamentally constitutive of what was being called information and how it was valued, shared, and used in practice. In fact, this separation is what made it possible to even plan an information village: where information activity could be isolated from other spheres of life, roles such as "information seekers" and "information producers" allotted, and the impact of information measured. At a later stage also, when the IVRP was framed as a research project, this understanding of information

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as a self-contained thing facilitated the process. One of the claims the proposal made, for example, was that access to information would improve utilization of entitlements for poverty alleviation. The project was accordingly built to measure such an improvement. As described earlier, treating information as an input that shaped outcomes was amenable to measuring changes in outcomes. Moreover, seeing information in this way also made it possible for the project to propose a problem-solution pair that it could work on: for instance, if the proposal could suggest that access to information would lead to an improved utilization of entitlements for poverty alleviation, information shops could play a role in increasing awareness through the provision of information about entitlement programs.[48] All of this became possible only if information was understood as measurable and isolatable from people's broader lives.

Third, information was also seen as separate from the material form of its circulation. While the project paid attention to material form and used multiple artifacts such as blackboards, phones, computers, and PA systems to carry out its task of making information available, information was nevertheless seen as distinct from this material form. Right from the 1992 dialogue, the word "information" in fact provided a way to talk about things beyond medium and materiality, an ability to talk about agricultural know-how broadly, for example, without constantly referring to whether the know-how was an idea, a practice, on paper, or on a CD. When information was imputed properties—such as being quantifiable or useful—its specific material form was not considered in this process. Material form was not disregarded, but at the same time, information was seen as distinct from its material form.

Overall, the dialogue framed the problem as one of information poverty, where structural inequalities as well as the messiness of everyday politics and negotiations, while relevant, were not central. They surfaced as minor irritants that might disrupt the project from time to time but were not treated as central to the nature of resource distribution in a community. The objective of the project was information provision and how the work of information provision could succeed. It was not to challenge or explicitly articulate the resource distribution or power structures in a community, especially in an overt manner. Presumably, information provision and politics could be carried on in parallel, without getting intertwined. In the final conception of the project too, its community-based model hinged on faith in the strength

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and political non-manipulability (by political parties) of the existing traditional panchayats (distinct from the constitutionally mandated elected panchayats). While the project at its inception recognized that political action was not confined to organized political parties, it was decided that village-level politics around the project should be dealt with at the village level; the foundation would not interfere. The IVRP was, thus, not to engage with the overt or covert political action of residents, nor was this even talked about. To that extent, its role in information provision was supposed to be apolitical or isolated from politics.

In summary then, the conceptualization and setup of the IVRP moved between particularistic and abstract uses of the term information. Social, economic, and political factors as well as material form, while taken into consideration—as in the decisions of where to locate information shops or offering multiple modes of communication so people with different levels of education could use them—were never seen as constitutive of information. They were, at best, seen as "impacting" information use. Sreekumar (2007) goes even further to argue that, in spite of all its efforts at gender, class, or caste-sensitive design, the IVRP ended up reinforcing existing divides by working with the already powerful members of the community even as it followed a community-centered design.

In chapter 5, I ask what information actually looks like in practice at the village level, among individuals characterized thus far (rather blandly) as "information seekers" and "information producers." While the way the IVRP was conceptualized and the way it worked in practice were quite different, I find that these early ideas nonetheless also shaped what information shops in villages were able to do in practice by 2009.

## CASE 3: MKSS'S INFORMATION CAMPAIGNS IN RAJASTHAN

Having outlined two ways of thinking about information from the 2000s and 1990s, I now go back a decade further to the late 1980s and early 1990s, and to Rajasthan in north India, where I found a third and very different conception of information. While the Indian RTI Act would only be legislated in 2005, the terminology and idea of a "right to information" made an appearance in a research report titled "Delivery Systems of Poverty Alleviation Programs for the Rural Poor" as far back as 1991. In a section titled "Right to Information," the report emphasized

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Information that:

(a) Prevents corruption
(b) Leads to a change in perception
(c) Is provided when sought
(d) Is widely disseminated

> Information is power, but the right to information is greater power. What is the information available that will lead to action at grass root levels? It is obviously the information that conceals a potential for legitimate change . . . information provided must allow for a shift in perception. To allow the oppressed to see their oppression in stark terms. To allow them to present it to the rest of society in terms they will be forced to accept. (Roy et al. 1991, 168–169)[49]

The report was written by members of MKSS, a "people's organization" that was officially set up in Rajasthan in 1990 and saw itself as part of "the non-party political process in India" (MKSS 2022). Through its campaigns for land and for minimum wages in the late 1980s and early 1990s, MKSS's work started to focus on government records and eventually on a right for citizens to examine government records. It was in this regard that the idea of a "right to information" came into circulation and, much later (in 2005), became the title of a national legislation. In chapter 6, I will systematically work through MKSS's campaigns culminating in the first Right to Information dharna (sit-in) in 1996. In this section, however, I have a much more modest goal: how did information even come to be seen as important by MKSS following its early campaigns, and how did MKSS frame information in its work? I focus here on the period between 1987—when the group that would later establish the MKSS came to stay in Devdungri village in south-central Rajasthan[50]—and 1991—when the term "right to information" appeared in the report mentioned above. By 1991, MKSS had started to frame information as potentially valuable in certain circumstances and for specific ends, including making power structures and underlying assumptions of government policy visible. This framing was very much in keeping with MKSS's identity as a political people's movement and its experiences working in a region that relied heavily on public works.

### BACKGROUND FOR THE FRAMING: EARLY CAMPAIGNS (1987–1991)

The idea of increased access to government records and government decision-making processes was not new in India and had been voiced on several

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occasions previously, especially in the arena of environmental activism.[51] In spite of these earlier instances, however, the 1991 report contained one of the first explicit mentions of a "right to information" within the realm of public rural development programs. The insistence on a "right" was to allow for a flexibility in how information was defined, redefined, and expanded by activists in the years to come.

Four activists authored the 1991 report for the Institute for Development Studies Jaipur (IDSJ).[52] As has now been documented extensively, the activists—former civil servant Aruna Roy, Nikhil Dey, Shankar Singh, and Anchie Singh—had settled in Devdungri in June 1987 with an objective of working with and organizing the rural poor, and they would later go on to form the MKSS with other residents of the region in 1990. One thing to bear in mind is that the IDSJ report was written *after* the authors had acquired more than four years of experience with the working of government delivery systems in the region around Devdungri, in addition to several more years working in other regions of Rajasthan and India.[53] Two campaigns from these four years figured prominently in the 1991 report and significantly shaped its conclusions, including the section on a right to information: a land campaign and a minimum wages campaign. I describe these campaigns in brief below and return to the minimum wages one in detail in chapter 6.

The first, a land campaign, was conducted between 1987 and 1990 in a village about 8 km from Devdungri.[54] It involved regaining public land from a local landlord who had treated that land as his private property for many years. Even though the documents associated with the land indicated

Figure 3.2
MKSS logo. Source: http://mkssindia.org/.

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that it belonged to the government, the landlord controlled it on a day-to-day basis. The objective of the land campaign was to get the land allocated to a village cooperative supported by the Devdungri activists. The campaign eventually succeeded, and the government allocated the land to a working women's cooperative from the village. This change was reflected in the land documents. The cooperative also went on to take possession of the land and make use of it. The land campaign established the centrality of government documents in the interactions between village residents and the local-level state.

A second set of campaigns concerned with minimum wage took place in parallel with the land campaign between 1987 and 1991 in a drought-prone region surrounding Devdungri. The climate coupled with the small land holdings meant that agriculture provided little employment or income to residents in this region. Consequently, government-sponsored public works schemes—such as the state-level famine relief scheme or a national-level employment scheme—were much sought after. In spite of being government-run, the worksites did not follow minimum wage laws and were notorious for paying arbitrary and delayed wages. Moreover, workers did not have access to the labor rolls that detailed their attendance and work output at the sites. In two such cases that I present in detail in chapter 6, the Devdungri group brought together a set of village residents who protested the nonpayment of minimum wages. After a long series of investigations, promises, and retractions from the government, some of the protestors were paid minimum wages. The minimum wage campaigns reinforced the idea that government documents were critical for village residents. Further, they established that what documents such as the labor roll recorded was often at variance with what residents said had happened in practice.

## INFORMATION IN MKSS'S WORK

Keeping these campaigns in mind, I return now to the conclusions of the IDSJ report. Here, it is worth quoting more fully the section on the need for a Right to Information from the report.

> What is the information available that will lead to action at grass root levels? It is obviously the information that conceals a potential for legitimate change. This legitimacy can take two forms. It can be the hiding of information of a corrupt practice, or it can be information which would make further space for the beneficiaries. The lack of information which facilitates corruption is the kind most village people show an interest in immediately . . . easy access to such information

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> being built into any program is of great importance to its health. Identifying the pieces of information which would prevent such corruption and the routes of access to it is one necessary at the formulation stage of any programme.
>
> The other kind of information that would need to be provided is information that would make the programme more effective. It would not only inform about the program itself; but also give information that provides a new perspective, one that allows for a shift in thinking. Every strata of society no matter how poor has a very strong code of ethics. The poor are at the receiving end of an accusation by all others that they are poor only through their own fault. It is an accusation so diligently dinned in that the oppressed not only have to assimilate such paradigms, but also have to form a code strong enough to allow them to retain a measure of self-respect. This, the more affluent are only willing to allow them as long as the applecart is not upset. This is why information provided must allow for a shift in perception. To allow the oppressed to see their oppression in stark terms. To allow them to present it to the rest of society in terms they will be forced to accept. (Roy et al. 1991, 168–169)

There is a lot to analyze in this framing of information, especially when understood as emerging from the land and minimum wage campaigns described earlier.[55] Reading both extracts from the report together, first, information is largely abstract in this conception. It is not particularistic in the sense we saw before: thus, the question "information about what?" is never answered in granular terms that tell us if this is about weather or agriculture. Nor is this thing called information attributed implicit properties or an autonomous value in the extract, but it *is* described in terms of what it can potentially achieve. Thus, it is "information that conceals a potential for legitimate change," prevents corruption, or "provides a new perspective." Further, the extract also points to specific conditions in which information is empowering: if provided when sought and when widely disseminated. While these conditions are prerequisites for information to be useful, they are not treated as properties of information. The value of information is located then not in itself, but in whether it can be leveraged to bring about shifts in perception about government schemes and one's interaction with the government. Information is still abstract in this conception (information about what?), but it is qualified (information that prevents corruption, allows for a shift in perception and so on). That said, information here, as in everything else I presented so far, is treated as a thing ("pieces of information") though reified to a lesser extent.

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Second, the material form of information is not part of the argument, and presumably the points about information are independent of its material form. Read alongside the chronology of the campaigns that shaped these conclusions, the absence of material form in this discussion is even more puzzling: after all, MKSS's campaigns and experiences at the time had centered on paper copies of government records. Thus, even as information is used in an abstract sense in the report, the chronology of events suggests that MKSS moved from demanding a particular document to the use of information in an abstract sense in its writing and work. How did information become the word of choice at this time? This gap suggests that the history of similar movements in India as well as external discourse might have influenced the precise choice of terminology, as detailed in this chapter and elsewhere in this book.

Third, the discussion does not characterize people as having or not having information (the classic binary between information haves and information have nots). Instead, the discussion focuses on what would make available information valuable to a specific population. ("What is the information available that will lead to action at grass root levels?")[56] Further, by focusing on a *right* to information, the discussion also shifts from information provision to potentially demanding information.

Fourth, the discussion relates information to hiding or concealment: the thesis is that information can conceal potential for legitimate change. Thus, it is not just that lack of information about the functioning of government programs can be used to hide practices; available information may itself be framed such that it conceals the broader value system and structures within which government programs function. For example, the excerpt suggests that the poor are forced to accept a paradigm that accuses them of being responsible for their own poverty.[57] Knowing more about how government programs function will not change much in this paradigm. What is required, instead, is to understand how the underlying rationale of programs is related to the functioning of programs on the ground. That is also why information about how government programs work is not everything ("not only inform about the program itself"), since this information likely reflects the underlying assumptions and rationale of the program itself. Instead, the authors suggest, information can be as much a tool to bring about a shift in perception about the way in which poverty or

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antipoverty schemes are framed or presented ("To allow the oppressed to see their oppression in stark terms. To allow them to present it to the rest of society in terms they will be forced to accept"). Thus, power structures are an integral part of MKSS's framing of information and its potential role.

In summary then, MKSS's discussion of information in the 1991 report uses information in the abstract and does not emphasize material form. It qualifies information to suggest when it might be of value instead of imputing it an intrinsic, autonomous value that persists in all conditions. The discussion takes a view of information that sees existing structures as constitutive of information, rather than as external factors that impact it. In chapter 6, I describe in more detail the campaigns on which MKSS's framing was based as well as campaigns in subsequent years that built on and expanded the scope of this framing. While my focus in this chapter has been on framing, as with the other cases I will focus on information in practice in that chapter.

## CONCLUSION

Providing a deep dive into the way the three cases I studied conceptualized information, this chapter also laid out the trajectories that each followed (especially the IVRP and MKSS) to embrace information. For each case, I examined whether information was treated as abstract, particularistic, or both; as having specific intrinsic attributes or as having the potential to lead to specific outcomes; and finally, the nature of its relationship with social structures and material form.

While information was central to all three cases, the chapter showed how it was conceptualized and operationalized in quite different ways. Jensen's analysis is focused on one type of information, that is, price information, for the most part. Only briefly does Jensen bring up information in the abstract while talking about its implications for the working of a market. The IVRP's conceptualization of information, on the other hand, moved regularly between particularistic and abstract uses of the term, helping the project both establish the need for information to funders and supporters, and enable it to operationalize its day-to-day provision. Of the three cases, MKSS's discussion of information consistently used the term in the abstract.

Jensen's account treated price information as objective fact. Social relations and the material form of information were noticeably absent in these narratives of how information circulates. The IVRP also associated

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information with a fairly clearly defined set of properties and value: information could be produced, categorized, bought, sold, and measured. It could also bring a host of benefits to livelihoods and entitlements. While the IVRP paid attention to how social, economic, and political factors as well as material form could impact information use, these factors were not seen as fundamentally constituting information. MKSS also suggested that information might be of value but qualified the circumstances in which this would hold. Unlike the other two cases, it was also the only group that explicitly brought up the idea that information could conceal as much as it could reveal. Here again it saw existing structures as critical to shaping what information could be leveraged for and by whom.

Thus, the conceptions of information that were deployed in the three cases seem to diverge along multiple dimensions. What happened when these conceptions played out on the ground? In subsequent chapters, I examine how the conceptions of information that were the focus of this chapter got reinforced or contested in practice in the everyday lives of those they sought to benefit. More specifically, I explore what happens when politics is denied in chapter 4 with the case of circulation of price information among fishers of Kerala. In chapter 5, I take up a case where politics is bracketed in the information villages of Puducherry. In chapter 6, I probe a case where politics is front and center in the Right to Information campaign in Rajasthan. I ask whether even a visibly political understanding of information such as the one MKSS advocated nevertheless obscured some kinds of politics in the process of social change it attempted to set in motion. But first, I turn to the case of the fishers in Kerala in chapter 4.

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4

# POLITICS DENIED: CONSTRUCTING EFFICIENT MARKETS WITH MOBILE PHONES AND PRICE INFORMATION

## INTRODUCTION

The center of activity in Vizhinjam at 6 a.m. in the month of August was its shore, where the whirring of boat engines and auction cries pierced the air. As boats approached the sandy shore from the sea, their operators switched off their engines. Stepping knee-deep into the water, they pulled their boats onto the sand in preparation for unloading their catch for auctioning. As my translator and I made our way to the shoreline and toward the boats drawn up there, we passed dozens of small piles of glistening fish (sardines, mackerel, squid, cuttlefish, and other varieties) that were being auctioned right off the sand, and in some cases, even before the fish could be fully unloaded from the boats. Some fishermen were unloading substantial quantities of fish in plastic and cane baskets on the sand, while others dumped the small numbers of fish in their hands or in plastic bags to start an auction around that pile. Each auction (and its auctioneer, who was the one shouting out the price bids and invariably a man) was surrounded by a knot of four to ten men and women. Once the auctioneer had a buyer and an agreed-upon price for a specific lot of fish, the bidding stopped. Some buyers would signal to their loader at this point to pack the fish in baskets and take it to the road for icing; others would do so themselves. The buyer would pull out cash to pay the auctioneer, who, in turn, would pay the fishermen or note down the transaction for settling accounts later. Payment completed, the auctioneer would then move on to conduct the next auction, often while attending to phone calls in parallel and scribbling down details of the recently concluded auction transaction on a piece of paper.

Meanwhile, further inland, men balancing baskets of fresh fish on their heads walked from the shore to the road one hundred meters away, clearing a path for themselves on the crowded beach by shouting at bystanders in Malayalam to "move aside." Fish vendors sitting on upturned aluminum vessels

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called saruvams, all of them women,[1] formed a path from the beach to the road and sold fish off a wooden plank balanced in front of them. Periodically, they dipped into other saruvams placed adjacent to them to replenish supplies. They announced the types and prices of fish they had that day to the few direct customers looking to buy fish fresh from the sea for individual household consumption. Bargaining with their customers, they alternately cajoled and berated them to arrive at a price. Yet other vendors iced the fish in their saruvams and loaded them up into the autos (popularly referred to as "Ape," a reference to their brand, the Piaggio Apé) waiting nearby. These autos would then travel to nearby marketplaces where the vendors regularly sold their fish. Closer to the road, in a shed with plastic crates, men weighed much larger volumes of fish on a weighing machine. Lorries parked along the road would later ferry these crates to other domestic markets or to the port for export.

Boats continued to arrive at the Vizhinjam shore throughout the day, though their numbers would reduce as the sun climbed higher in the sky. Hundreds of multi-colored plywood and fiberglass boats (or vallams in Malayalam) bobbed up and down in the Vizhinjam cove during "season" time (July through September), protected from the Arabian Sea by a seawall. Also protecting them and the fishermen who rode them, swore the fishermen, were the watchful eyes of Our Lady of the Voyage, gazing down from the tower of a church named for her that overlooked the sea and the beach where fishing boats auctioned their fish daily.

—Extract from fieldnotes, August 2012

The textbook definition of an economic transaction in a market involves a buyer, a seller, and a product or service that is put up for sale. The price of the product is determined by the supply and demand for it in a perfect market. The role of information is critical to the functioning of such a market. In an imperfect market that is plagued by information asymmetries, the provision of information to all actors should once more allow for a price that is determined by demand and supply, rather than by the differential access to information that varied actors enjoy. Further, these conditions should lead to more efficient functioning of the market and, in turn, to an increase in the buyer's and seller's welfare. This is the fundamental idea underlying research and interventions that focus on the importance and implications of making supply, demand, and price information available to farmers and fishers. However, as I shall lay out in this chapter, prices and price information are

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Figure 4.1
Steeple and statue at Our Lady of the Voyage church, Vizhinjam, Kerala. Photograph by the author (2012).

seldom that simple. With the vignette at the start of this chapter and what follows, I use the case of fish landing centers in Kerala in southwest India to show that economic transactions (including how prices get decided) look significantly less elegant on the ground. The chapter will argue that, far from emerging naturally in a transaction between a buyer and a seller based on demand and supply conditions, prices are arrived at relationally in a process that involves negotiations between a host of actors. I show in this chapter how transaction decisions and the value of price information are, thus, embedded in social relations and power dynamics. More important, when these relations and dynamics are denied—as they often are in valorizing the

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Figure 4.2
View of the cove from church tower, Vizhinjam, Kerala. Photograph by the author (2012).

importance of access to price information and the role of ICTs in providing this information—there are consequences for the targeted actors as well as for policymaking in that sector.

This chapter is based on fieldwork conducted in 2012 and 2016 in fish landing centers in southern Kerala (Thiruvananthapuram district) and in northern Kerala (Kozhikode district).[2] The research in 2012, which can be found in Srinivasan and Burrell (2013) and (2015), was expressly framed as a revisit of economist Robert Jensen's (2007) work. As outlined in chapter 3, Jensen had argued that the introduction of mobile phones in coastal Kerala led to their use in finding price information, and further, that it lowered price dispersion and increased producer and consumer welfare. The goal with our revisit was to understand whether/why price information was valuable and who found it valuable in the fish supply chain. We carried out this revisit of an earlier study at two sites, one in north Kerala in regions where the earlier study was conducted, and the second in southern Kerala to examine how/whether the value of price information could be place-dependent even within Kerala.

My goal in this chapter is broader, and therefore, I don't use this research to directly engage with the specifics of Jensen's work. Instead, I leverage it in

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Figure 4.3
Fish vendors on the beach against the backdrop of auctions and anchored boats, Vizhinjam, Kerala. Photograph by the author (2012).

an attempt to move away from an understanding of economic transactions involved in the sale and purchase of fish as "a neutral pattern, a mental category, a set of variables impinging . . . from the outside" (Willis 1981, 1). I would like to understand, instead, how the culture of fish sales "comprises experiences, relationships, and ensembles of systematic types of relationship which not only include 'choices' and 'decisions' at particular times, but also structure, really and experientially, how these 'choices' come about and are defined in the first place" (1). With this in mind, rather than assuming the importance of price information, this chapter examines how price is determined, how price information is accessed, and how it came to be valued and leveraged differently along the fish supply chain at two sites in Kerala.

The answers to some of these questions lie in the history of the fishing sector in Kerala, to which I turn in the following section. Against that backdrop, I show how price is always actively negotiated and produced by various actors in the fish supply chain, rather than emerging naturally or automatically. For this reason, price information is seldom a fixed detail that

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can be easily conveyed to someone. I then examine how accessible this price information (to the extent that it can even be understood as a fixed detail) is to the varied buyers and sellers of fish. Finally, I examine structural reasons why different actors in the north and south Kerala fishing sectors value and leverage price information differently even where they do have the means to access it. In concluding, I use these analyses to argue that the process of producing price (and price information) is inherently political and that ignoring this politics risks further marginalizing certain actors and social groups involved in the fishing sector.

A note on method: As detailed in chapter 2, for this case, I conducted fieldwork between July and October 2012 and in May 2016 at fish landing centers in Thiruvananthapuram and Kozhikode districts.[3] To identify the range of actors involved in the auctions, as well as the ways in which price information circulated, I conducted direct observation of fish auctioning and selling practices at beach and city fish markets, and conducted over one hundred interviews with actors working across the full range of the fishing supply chain, including less-discussed actors such as intermediaries of various kinds (thus, not just "buyers" and "sellers" and not just large vendors or boat operators) to understand their practices around price information. Based on my observations and by snowballing, I ensured that my interviewees also spanned different social locations, including both men and women, for instance. Toward understanding the history of the sector within which price information was circulating, I spoke to researchers and activists, and also drew on publications authored by researchers, the government, and fishers' cooperatives. Thus, while my focus was on price information, an ethnographic approach that relied on multiple methods and sources allowed me to examine its social and material roots as well as the information order within which it was produced and made meaningful.

## THE CHANGING FACE OF THE KERALA FISHING SECTOR SINCE THE 1950s

Marine fishing communities and the marine fishing economy have been integral to the coastal state of Kerala for centuries. The latest available figures (2016 to 2017) from the Kerala fisheries department attest to their continued centrality for the state.[4] Nevertheless, many aspects of the vignette I started with might not be recognizable to someone familiar with fish transactions in,

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say, 1950s Kerala. The technologies in use (outboard motors or OBMs, freezing, phones, and motorized transport) have changed in the intervening period even at traditional landing centers such as the one I was at (as opposed to a modern port or harbor), as have the volume of fish being transacted and the number of people involved. Perhaps most significantly, the organizational mechanism of the transactions—the public shore auction—looked considerably different half a century ago. It is worth understanding how these shifts in the fishing sector in the state came about.

Till the 1950s, Kerala's fishing economy consisted almost entirely of artisanal fishers, nonmechanized boats and mostly small-scale transactions that were conducted locally. All of this changed with the state-sponsored Indo-Norwegian project (INP) initiated in 1953 (Hapke 1996; Klausen 1968; Kurien 1985, 1992). The INP sought to modernize the fishing sector, and it did this through the introduction of mechanized craft.[5] The INP functioned only till the mid-1960s, but it fundamentally reshaped the technologies and relations of production involved in Kerala's fishing sector for times to come. The first change that came about beginning in this period was a massive growth in the volume of fish being transacted. This happened partly because the use of mechanized craft allowed fishers to go farther into the ocean and procure more fish. The higher domestic and export demand for fish (especially prawns) in this period,[6] and the opportunities that offered for profitmaking,[7] also significantly spurred the volume of transactions. Further, it encouraged the entry of nonfishers as investors on mechanized boats. With the state's encouragement (in the form of subsidies and grants as well as the creation of infrastructure), the number of mechanized fishing vessels (now including trawlers) going out to sea increased drastically in this period.[8] Trawl boats landed bulk catches of fish, and improved freezing and canning facilities helped process these large volumes of fish for export.

With a rise in the catch, demand, prices, and volumes of transacted fish, the sector became commercialized to a great extent, and a diverse range of (almost entirely male) traders entered the fray. Even as new actors entered the supply chain and the sector expanded as a whole, the importance of specific roles in the sector declined in parallel. For instance, auxiliary activities such as net making, which were earlier undertaken at home and often by women, morphed into a large-scale operation undertaken in factories by private manufacturers. As the consumption of dried and salted fish declined over the years with the increased availability of fresh fish among consumers, the

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role played by traditional fish preservation experts (mostly women) came into question.[9]

Overall, an important consequence of an increase in the use of bigger boats, nets, and outboard motors for fishing, as well as the need for transportation and storage facilities for large volumes of fish, was that it increased the capital investment and changed the skills required to participate in the sector. This shift, in turn, proletarianized many fishers who could not invest in such craft or gear (Dietrich and Nayak 2006). Local fish vendors have also been faced with much greater competition as improvements in surface transport and refrigeration technology, alongside economic liberalization, have facilitated the entry of great volumes of fish from outside the state into markets in Kerala.

Finally, more recent research suggests that the introduction of mobile phones has brought dramatic changes to this sector in Kerala. The use of mobile phones has reduced price dispersion and wastage in these markets (Jensen 2007). Because fishers and buyers are able to use mobile phones to inquire about the price of fish in different landing centers and markets, they are able to make better decisions about where to sell or buy their fish. As the demand and supply for particular fish types is matched better, wastage of fish reduces. Additionally, fishers' income from their fish increases as they are able to sell more at better prices and without wastage, while consumers too are able to purchase what they want for cheaper.

Thus, the organization of the fishing sector in Kerala has seen tremendous shifts since the 1950s, especially in the nature of technology and capital investment, and some aspects of the identity of the actors it involved. In parallel, many of these changes, as well as more traditional structural features of the sector, have been contested by sections of Kerala fishers since at least the 1960s—and this too has shaped the fishing sector significantly. Several fish workers' unions [Kerala Swatantra Matsya Thozilali Federation (KSMTF) and Theeradesa Mahila Vedi, an organization of fish-vending women being prominent examples] and a federation of fishing cooperatives called the South Indian Federation of Fishing Societies (SIFFS), had been formed by the 1980s and have been prominent ever since in organizing fishers, especially in south Kerala (Kurien 1992).[10] These groups were formed at least partly to respond to the after-effects of the mechanization and the export drive, such as overfishing. Earlier, artisanal fishers were limited in how far they could venture into the sea in their unmotorized craft. They also used nets and other gear that were targeted at particular species of fish. But with

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the introduction of motors and trawling nets, which caught everything that came their way, it was becoming progressively harder for artisanal fishers to find fish (Kurien 1991). Artisanal fishers were also unable to raise the substantial capital investments required for large boats, which meant they could not compete in this market. In fact, even the loans that fishers took for their limited equipment were under exploitative terms: in return for taking credit to buy equipment (or even for living on someone's land), fishermen would have to part with their catch at a price that their financiers (and landlords) dictated (Kurien 2005).

To alleviate the problems faced by artisanal fishers, collective action worked simultaneously by developing technology, pressuring the state to pass regulations to institutionalize trawling bans, and working to create cooperatives that could offer fishers credit and help them market their fish at good prices. The development of relatively cheap, robust plywood vallams and outboard motors was the result of the first direction of work (Gillet 1985; Vivekanandan 2002). State-mandated seasonal bans on trawlers presented a partial victory (and an ongoing struggle) on the second front (Kurien 1991). But it is the third that has the most bearing in the context of price information: the adoption of an open auctioning system that was controlled by fishers' cooperatives (Kurien 2005). Local fisher cooperatives formed in the 1970s had two goals: to make cheap loans available to fishers and to get them a good price for their catch. Because it delinked credit from the sale of fish, the open auctioning system was seen as an effective mechanism to get at these goals. To make this system work, cooperatives employed "salesmen" who would auction their fishers' catch at a fair price (Kurien 1980, 2005). While auctions today are not controlled by cooperatives quite as envisioned, these developments nonetheless made auctions and the figure of the auctioneer prominent in the story of fish transactions in Kerala.

Today, not all auctioneers are representatives of fishermen's cooperatives; individual investors also participate in the open auctioning.[11] The former type of auctioneer would typically represent a cooperative from which the fisher had taken a loan for his fishing needs, while the latter would have invested directly in the fisher's equipment (boat, motor, nets, their repair, and so forth). In return, the auctioneer (whether an investor or as a cooperative's salesman) received the right to auction the fish and a percentage commission on the eventual sale of the fish. It was the auctioneer who visibly conducted the transactions in which fish was bought and sold in various landing centers

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along the Kerala coastline. In that sense, it was also the auctioneer who was most intimately connected to the concept of price and price information. So, how exactly was this price arrived at, valued, and leveraged in the context of the historical trajectory and geographical variations in the Kerala fishing sector? I turn to these questions next by examining the auctioning practices and the process through which price emerged in a south and a north Kerala landing site.

## THE PRODUCTION OF PRICE BY AUCTIONEERS, BUYERS, AND OTHERS

"Koottiyunda? Kootiyunda?" roared an auctioneer on the beach. Anyone willing to top that price?

Feet planted firmly on the sand, next to the pile of kanava (cuttlefish, also popularly referred to as "CF") he was auctioning, Peter was one among many on this densely packed strip of land during "season" time when export fish such as prawn, squid, and cuttlefish were being brought in from the sea in blue, red, and green plywood and fiber vallams (boats). No sooner had a boat been navigated to the sandy edge of the land than the three to seven fishermen onboard would jump off with baskets of fish that they would proceed to unceremoniously dump on the sand so they could be auctioned. That is when Peter and other auctioneers like him, potential buyers, and onlookers would all congregate around the fish, appearing as though magically when a pile started being auctioned.

Like Peter, many other auctioneers braved the sweltering heat of Kerala monsoons to auction the seasonal konju (prawn) and koonthal (squid), as well as more common fish varieties such as mathi (oil sardines), ayla (mackerel), choora (tuna), and natholi (anchovy). Whether the auctioneers calling out prices were surrounded by a handful of individuals or a larger crowd of potential buyers seemed to depend on the variety of the fish, its freshness, and the price being called out. Potential buyers on the shore were themselves a mixed lot that included mid-size traders—almost all men dressed much like the auctioneers in shirts and patterned lungis (sarongs)—and smaller-scale fish vendors, most of them women in a distinctive attire of lungi, blouse. and upper cloth, carrying large saruvams (aluminum vessels). The circle around auctioneers also included a few urban, middle-class individuals and families who stood out by the way they were dressed, as well as by their more tentative participation in auctions. A few auctioneers also stood back in the shade, some distance away from the frantic auctioning, chatting with fellow auctioneers or on their phones and, simultaneously, keeping an eye on the auctions and on boats arriving from the sea.

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Figure 4.4
Auction at a south Kerala landing center. Photograph by the author (2012).

When no one responded to his call for a higher bid, Peter closed the bid on the pile of kanava. He then pulled out a notebook and pen to calculate how much he had to be paid by the buyer and, also, what he had to pay the fishermen standing around him whose fish catch he had just auctioned. Lily, the fish vendor who had secured the deal (and who I learned was a regular at these auctions), counted out her payment to the auctioneer in currency notes. Peter unzipped the black leather pouch he had been holding throughout to add part of the cash he received to it, handing most of the rest to the fishermen while noting down the sales amounts and his auctioning fees in his notebook. By this time, the church tax collector too had reached the scene and was issuing a receipt from his receipt book to the fishermen and to the fish vendor, both of whom paid him

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Figure 4.5
Auction at a north Kerala landing center. Photograph by the author (2012).

1 percent on the transaction amount as church tax. Peter had barely concluded this transaction before he received a call from another set of fishermen whose boat was expected at the shore soon. It was time for Peter to start a new round of bids.

Meanwhile, Lily hired a man to carry the fish to an auto that would take her to a fish market just outside the city of Thiruvanathapuram, a short ride away. The man loaded up the fish in an aluminum basket which he hoisted to his head. He accompanied Lily, who was carrying another vessel of fish, to the entrance of the market. Once the vessels were set on the ground alongside a few other fishvending women's vessels, Lily paid him. She then walked to the nearby ice plant to get ice so her fish would stay fresh. Lily made one final entry into the crowded beach area to fill up a small vessel with sand. Later in the market, this sand would serve as a base on which to place the fish and also to signal their freshness to potential buyers. Lily loaded her multiple vessels into the auto, got in herself, and set off for the market.

At the market, Lily found a spot at the back with the other women vendors. She set out her saruvams up front and balanced a wooden board on them. Taking out some sand from her vessel, she patted it into three mounds on the board. On these mounds, she made the sign of the cross. Then she placed fish on the mounds for display and sale. One pile for the tuna, another for crabs, and so on. The squid she placed directly on the board. The tuna had its fin pulled up and kept that way with a lump of sand. A small bowl was set aside for earnings—everything that

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> came from customers went into the bowl and she would count it up at the end of the day. Lily's day of bargaining with her customers had begun.
>
> (Fieldnotes from a Vizhinjam auction and from the Ambalathara fish market, August 2012)

After observing several supply chains of fish sales such as the one above, and individuals like Peter and Lily who were involved in them, I was still at a loss to understand how price emerged in practice in the sale and purchase of fish at auctions. There were no displays or notices announcing the demand for or supply of particular types of fish on the beach. And, while there were some broad patterns in the availability of particular fish types in different seasons, fishers and auctioneers confirmed there was no telling what types of fish and how much of a particular type would be brought in from the sea on a particular day at a specific landing center (even by looking at the sea and the weather). Nor, as far as I could see, was any auctioneer, fisher, or small-scale vendor pulling out sheets of paper, or calculators, to calculate price based on demand and supply that day. Where was even the time in such an auctioning environment to adjust those calculations on a minute-by-minute basis? Nevertheless, these auctions happened, fishers sold their fish, and buyers bought them every day, day after day.

Whenever I asked auctioneers how they fixed a price for a lot of fish and how they learned to do this, I would get responses such as what Johnson and Yesudas, salesmen employed with fishing societies affiliated to SIFFS, offered:

> We started [auctioning] with small fish, small quantities. So we would know the average. Now you see there are many boats here. There is variation in prices amongst them and that is not exactly dependent on quality. On one boat, it might sell at 9.80 [Indian rupees (Rs.)], on another at 10, one at 10.20, for tuna. There's no single rate here. So, that is known when you bring some fish to me. If you bring 100 choora (tuna), we will calculate roughly @10. Someone gets fewer, we will add an amount to that. This is a technique.
>
> [On being asked if being from a fishing family helped] We are, but that doesn't do much. Being here makes the difference—you get the idea from being here. Like, how would you open a computer? Switch it on and then use, right? Initially, it was difficult. Then you learn how to auction small fish, big fish, damaged fish . . .[12]

When I asked private investor-auctioneer Peter how he would differentiate on prices on piles of fish that look almost the same to an outsider, he responded,

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"That's how it is. That's business, we calculate on averages. Average weight of one fish . . . we keep the kilogram price of a single fish in mind and go for auction." Private investor-auctioneer Joseph pointed to other "techniques" he used to sell a catch at good prices (from the fisher's point of view). Speaking about an auction he had recently concluded, he discussed why he had split up the catch from a boat into three unequal piles that he auctioned separately. His reason for splitting up the catch into multiple parts was, once again, to get more people interested in the sale. He had also found that the smaller piles fetched more money this way than auctioning the large catch all together.[13]

Yet another of Joseph's techniques was:

> [speaking about an auction he started at Rs.1,500] One must always begin low. That way, more people will come to the auction. If I had started at 3,000, many people would not have come to the bid at all; [they] would have gone to nearby boats. I start at 1,500 and go up bit by bit. On some other day when a lot of fish has not come in, I might start with 1,800. Since I am here, I know the prices in the harbor.

Buyers, meanwhile, had their techniques and strategies for gauging acceptable prices. This involved calculating their costs: for example, export purchasers had to factor in their costs of transporting the fish to a port city, and all buyers at the Vizhinjam shore had to include the church tax on their purchase. At the other end, buyers needed a sense of who they could sell to and how much for. A fish vendor who sold at nearby Varkala beach mentioned that "foreign visitors at the restaurants on that beach . . . are willing to pay even Rs. 500 per dish," which was why she targeted restaurants that would pay her more on that beach during season time. Much as Joseph had mentioned while elaborating on his own techniques for procuring high prices, this vendor noted that "Buyers will also know how much they can sell for. If they can sell for higher in a market, they will take it at a higher price."

Finally, like Joseph, other auctioneers and buyers alike emphasized the significance of the fact that they had been auctioning at a particular location for several years. They knew location-specific costs (such as the church tax), regular sellers and buyers, and who would return to them the next day if they received a discount today.[14] That they were there all day, every day, watching the arrival of fish, and as a result, they just "knew" (the price).

What the auctioneers and others were telling me was that the calculation and setting of prices was no simple matter.[15] For one, demand and supply

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were variables they had to gauge through experience, their social networks, and by being there. They did ask around for prices at other centers at times (and this was especially true for larger-scale operators, such as export agencies, and, as we will see in a later section, the ring-seine boats of north Kerala), but much of their calculation was based on their landing center, observing how much fish was being unloaded that day, how many buyers were around, what price other auctioneers at the center were using, and so on. Knowing the bulk demand for the day from export agencies, and the rate that agents were allowed to pick up fish at by their export agency, also informed prices. It is worth pointing out at this stage that almost all discussions of price were oral, whether face to face or on the phone (for instance, during auctions or while selling). Price was almost never discussed or accessed through written communication of any kind (such as text messages on the phone or announcements on electronic display boards or newspapers).

Nor were prices based only on levels of demand and supply. They were also about *who* was making the demand or providing the supply and the priority given to maintaining trading relations with them. People's decisions on how much they would be willing to pay, or receive, for a given quantity of fish reflected how much they valued their relationship with the person with whom they were transacting. Where regulars were concerned, auctioneers and fishers repeatedly confessed to offering better (lower) prices, even where small volumes of fish were concerned, in the interest of continuing that relationship. Peter, who was also a purchaser for an export company during the season months, added "If we wish to build a relationship or I am a regular, he [auctioneer] will give me 100 rupees off on 1,500. This is all a part of business." Meanwhile, in his role as an auctioneer, Peter said he too would let a fish go for lower than the price it could have fetched or explicitly add a discount to the price arrived at—"the taste of the money he [the buyer] saves," Peter chuckled, "will bring him back to me for more [business]."

Moreover, it was also understood that both fishers and a boat's investor-auctioneer were entitled to keep a few pieces from the catch without paying for them (those pieces would not even come up for auction in such cases). Sometimes, an auctioneer would use his toes to gingerly pick up a few fish from the side of the pile he was auctioning and keep those aside for himself. I never saw this "fee" being disputed either. These efforts towards maintaining trade relationships are in keeping with findings from earlier decades (Kurien 1984). What they also highlight, however, is that occasionally fish was transacted in a way that made it difficult to assign it a price tag.

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There was also an ever-present ambiguity and some room for negotiation on prices at most auctions. The bids at an auction were seldom placed in words by potential buyers—instead, they would mouth a number, nod their head, raise an eyebrow, or gesture with their fingers to let the auctioneer know how much more they were willing to pay. These gestures would sometimes be contested. For example, in an auction for squid, when an auctioneer looked toward Lily, who I mentioned earlier, to raise the bid to Rs. 900, she shouted back "Who said 900? I only said 890."[16] At another instance on the same day, at an auction for crabs, the auction was closed at Rs. 340. Or so the auctioneer claimed, insisting the vendor had last bid Rs. 340. A few vendors supported him as well. The vendor, however, insisted she had only said Rs. 330 and started to take the crabs, thrusting that amount of cash in the auctioneer's hands and moving on. From observing several more instances of such altercations, I concluded that once the fish had been collected or deposited into a basket, the fish went with the vendor, regardless of what rate had actually been arrived at, who had misunderstood or was willfully misleading, whose voice was louder, or who was more popular or powerful in that scene.

The active construction of price also held at the other end of the supply chain. Here too, long-term relations and structural dynamics shaped the prices that were offered. Several vendors at the old Chaalai market in Thiruvananthapuram city (which had mostly male, Muslim and a few female, Latin Catholic Christian vendors) had been selling there a long time and also reported selling regularly to a list of hotels and to a few individuals. Moreover, gender played a significant part in how these prices were constructed both at this market and elsewhere.[17] Watching Lily and her fellow women vendors selling fish at a suburban market, it became apparent that their selling at markets was often driven by the need to sell off everything they had (this often did not happen despite their best efforts, and they would have to arrange for ice to store their leftover fish) and return home at a reasonable hour to their domestic duties, rather than getting the best price on every transaction. Even so, they could be at the market till 8 p.m.[18] In the patriarchal setup in which Lily and her colleagues operated, attracting customers to their stalls by outshouting their male counterparts—who often had cheaper fish from farther markets and more visible spots in the market[19]—was hard enough.[20] In these conditions, to let go of a customer who had walked up to their stall in the name of price seemed to be a luxury that the vendors could ill afford. I almost never saw the women vendors send customers away over

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price, though they did bargain hard over it. As a result, far from being a fixed amount, here too prices were dynamic and emerged as a result of the interaction taking place between a customer and a vendor in specific circumstances. So dynamic were prices for all the reasons I have laid out so far that Lily once told me that she could not ever predict if all the fish she bought on a day would get sold or for how much; she could only pray to God that it would. "You should pray for me as well," she had added wryly.

What becomes clear through these examples then is that price information is actively produced by a number of actors engaged in a variety of relations. My point here is not to dispute the economic laws governing price, but to emphasize that when price is treated as being out there and as automatically emerging as a result of the existing demand and supply, the active participation of varied actors and the forms of negotiation they undertake in its creation get obscured. Moreover, to the extent that price is arrived at in this way and through a series of negotiations, its value is harder to capture as some fixed number that can neatly be labeled "price information" and shared. Nevertheless, to the extent that we can at all consider this thing called price information as unproblematic and fixed, the next two sections examine who has access to it and who is able to leverage it.

## WHO HAS ACCESS TO PRICE INFORMATION?

As the vignettes so far have shown, a diverse range of people are present at and associated with fish auctions as they have been institutionalized in Kerala today. It is worth re-emphasizing here that the streamlining of public auctions and the presence of auctioneers elected by cooperatives have been critical to the development of such a public space and its relatively accessible process of auctioning.[21]

In parallel, and as other research has pointed out, mobile phones (and earlier, land phones) have enabled price information to circulate beyond the physical confines of the auctioning space, to other auctioning centers, markets, individual homes, and also to fishers out at sea. While the introduction of phones eases up some of the conditions to access price information (physical presence), it brings in others. Thus, owning/having access to a phone, some level of phone/digital literacy, and the availability of a telecom network are a few such factors to keep in mind. A vast amount of literature on the digital divide deals with these factors in great detail, so I will not dwell on

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them here. However, a few aspects that are specifically relevant for the fishers of Kerala are worth bringing up.

The fishing communities of Kerala have traditionally been outliers to the high development and literacy indices that the state of Kerala boasts of (Kurien 1995). While the constantly falling costs of mobile handsets and SIM cards has meant that mobiles have now become affordable to even lower-income groups within this community (such as the fishermen plying plywood vallams and small-scale fish vendors), literacy barriers are prevalent, particularly among the older generation of fishermen and fish-vending women.[22] Women in particular did not have access to mobile phones and adopted them much later than the men in their communities (Sreekumar 2011). While several female vendors I met in the course of my research were using phones, there were also many who did not possess a mobile phone or would not carry phones to auctions or markets for fear of losing them. Even those who had and/or used mobile phones would often do so with only a partial understanding of their various functionalities. For instance, most female vendors did not know how to store contacts on their phones or how to wield calls to/from numbers they were unfamiliar with. While they got around these gaps in innovative ways (by committing the last two digits of phone numbers to memory in order to recognize calls from those numbers, getting their kids to store numbers for them, or maintaining a paper-based list of phone numbers, among others), the limited level of familiarity and comfort with phones meant that female fish vendors' primary use for phones was to stay in touch with family and a small number of fellow vendors or known traders and auctioneers at specific landing centers.[23] In conjunction with the reasons already laid out, this was a further reason that women vendors were less likely than men to be accessing price information using mobile phones.

Finally, it is worth highlighting that with or without mobile phones, people need social networks through which to access price information. Even though mobile phones theoretically made physical presence dispensable and introduced the possibility of accessing price information from distant places, the fact remained that people needed a (direct/indirect) reliable contact—an actual phone number of a real person *in that place*—to actually have access to this price information. Only those who already had such contacts or had opportunities to build them while plying their trade or through their personal networks were able to access price information. Once again, my observations and conversations at auctions and fish markets revealed that the larger-scale

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operatives, such as export purchase agents, had more extensive connections (with auctioneers in several landing centers) than smaller-scale vendors. Small-scale vendors, where they called for price information at different sites at all, typically had a much shorter list of contacts, which typically included a known church tax collector, an auctioneer or two, or fellow vendors at a few centers.

Access to price information in practice was, thus, more complicated and heterogeneous than the theoretical possibility offered by the introduction of mobile phones in the fish supply chain. In the next section, I go a step further to understand what people did with price information if indeed they were able to access it. Who valued this information and why? And (how) did this vary along the Kerala coastline?

## WHO IS ABLE TO LEVERAGE PRICE INFORMATION?

Based on my research at a site in south Kerala (Vizhinjam, Thiruvananthapuram district) and one in north Kerala (Chaliyam, Kozhikode district), I found that two factors—the scale of operations and the density of operational/safe landing centers/markets in a region—were crucial in determining whether price information was treated as significant by fishers and buyers in making decisions on where and for how much to sell/buy fish. Drawing heavily on Srinivasan and Burrell (2013), I use this section to examine differences between the two sites and show how various categories of fishers and buyers located at the two sites go on to value and leverage price information differently in their lives.

As the vignettes from south Kerala showed, the fish supply chain consists (at the least and visibly) of a fisher (also called a producer or seller), a vendor (also called a consumer or buyer), and an auctioneer. Each of these categories includes further subcategories. For instance, as I already pointed out, an auctioneer could be a private investor or the representative of a fisher society. Similarly, the category of "fisher" covered several types of fishers: a fisher operating a plywood boat with outboard engines would operate very differently than one operating a catamaran, a ring-seine boat, a gillnetter with internal engines, or a trawler. Fishers also differ along the fish varieties and volumes they target at sea as well as the tools they use, such as hook and line, gillnets, ring seines, or trawl nets that are designed to catch pelagic and demersal fish varieties, which are found at different depths in the ocean. Similarly, the category of "buyers" includes an entire cast of characters, some of whom

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I introduced in the two vignettes on south Kerala. It includes small vendors, who resell the fish on the beach itself; others who take the fish as a headload or on cycles or motorbikes to sell to individual households; and those who take larger quantities in autos, bicycles, or small vans to sell in retail markets. Additionally, some of the fish are purchased for processing, whether in small quantities for salting or drying, or by fishmeal and other waste-processing factories. Wholesale merchants and exporters, meanwhile, constitute another category of buyers that purchase large quantities of fish and use insulated trucks to transport that fish to domestic markets and ports.

It is also worth pointing out here that, in a given region of the Kerala coastline, the different roles outlined above have traditionally been dominated by people from specific castes and religions (Hapke 1996; Kurien 2000; Subramanian 2009). For instance, fishers of south Kerala are largely (Latin Catholic) Christian, while they are Muslim in the north. Wholesale market traders are typically Muslim, including in the predominantly Christian fishing supply chain in south Kerala. The fishing supply chain also continues to be organized along gendered lines: women participate only as buyers in the marine fish supply chain in Kerala today. Even as buyers, while they form a large percentage of the small-scale fish vendors in the predominantly Christian southern coastline, there are few wholesale traders who are women.[24] Furthermore, they are more or less absent on auctioning grounds and markets on the northern coastline where there is lower acceptance of women working in public spaces among the predominantly Muslim fishing communities.

## THE FISHERS

The physical terrain of a coastline also significantly shapes the types of fishers and fishing that dominate it. Thus, the rocky southern Kerala coastline and its rough monsoon seas have significantly shaped the fishing sector in the region. For one, the operation of larger craft is unsafe on this coastline, leading to the predominance of smaller boats such as the plywood vallams seen in the vignettes. The presence of reefs has made gillnet fishing and choondapani (hook-and-line fishing) the popular modes of fishing in the region. Further, because several landing centers on this rough stretch of the Kerala coastline are deemed too dangerous to anchor in during bad weather and during the monsoons, this stretch has fewer all-season landing centers to choose from for several months of the year. Vizhinjam is one such safe center to which boats flock in the monsoon months.

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The smaller boats that predominate in this region typically used between two- and ten-person crews. Their catch was at most in hundreds of kilograms and every boatload contained a greater variety of fish. Boats in the region cost Rs. 2–3 lakhs (i.e., Rs. 200,000–300,000) in 2012. Because of their relatively low cost, these boats typically had a single owner and a single investor (an individual or a society,[25] as already discussed, typically from the same village as the fisher) from whom boat owners borrowed capital. Investors or society salesmen auctioned the catch from a boat and received a commission on sales in return for their investment in it.

In contrast to the south, fishers operating on the north Kerala coastline could safely use large boats because of the gradient of the shore. The calmer weather in the region and the safe conditions for landing also ensured there were several all-season landing centers along this coast. In conjunction with its clayey coastline conducive to sardines and prawns, all these reasons have led to this stretch of the Kerala coast being dominated by sardine fishing on motorized ring-seine boats and mechanized gillnetters. A typical ring-seine unit could bring in catches of between 3–12 t of mostly sardines, also including some mackerel and prawns during season time (June through August). Ring-seine boats were 60+ ft in length, and cost between Rs. 60–75 lakh (i.e., Rs. 6–7.5 million) in 2012 for the main boat, carrier boats, engine, and nets.[26] In addition to these, the repair of damaged nets, fixing engines, or boat repair required periodic investments ranging between tens of thousands and a few lakhs of rupees. Given the large scale of investment involved in the purchase and upkeep of a ring-seine unit, such units were typically collectively owned. However, even collective ownership was seldom enough to match the upfront investment and upkeep expenses. So, most ring-seine units relied additionally on investment from beyond their group. Thus, of its crew of 45 to 50 fishers, 25 to 35 members would be "share owners" in a typical ring-seine unit. Such share owners would have made investments of about Rs. 1 lakh (i.e., Rs. 100,000) each. External sources, such as private investors (many of them returnees from the Persian Gulf who used their earnings in the Gulf to start investing), and loans from fishers' societies (including from the state-led Matsyafed as well as occasionally a SIFFS group) would make up the rest.

Similar to the south, investors in the north received auctioning rights and a commission on sales.[27] However, given that boats had multiple investors in the north, it was the primary private investor (typically someone who would have invested Rs. 10 lakhs, i.e., Rs. 1 million, or more) who had the right to

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auction the catch from a ring-seine unit when it landed on his shore. Further, ring-seine unit owners typically chose investors hailing from different places in a strategic manner so they could sell their catch at a different shore—if they needed to for weather or fish supply–related reasons—knowing that they had a trusted auctioneer at that location as well. The availability of numerous all-season landing centers in the north made these transactions feasible.

Besides the ring-seine units, fishers in the north also used mechanized gillnetters that were 36+ ft long, cost Rs. 6–10 lakh or Rs. 0.6–1 million (this would depend on its exact size, whether it had external or internal motors, its storage capacity, and the nets it used), went out with a crew of three to four people, and could bring in between 1–1.5 t of fish, including different varieties such as tuna, prawn, squid, seer fish, and larger fish. These boats—which were closer to the plywood vallams of the south—were individually owned but that "owner" would have used his own funds in combination with loans from other sources (private investors, fishing society, or bank) to purchase the boat. Here, as in the ring-seine units, investors auctioned the catch from the boats in which they had invested and also received a commission on the sales.[28] Because of the relatively smaller capital involved in this case, gillnet unit owners would have only a single investor.[29]

To recap, investments as well as fish catches tended to be much higher for the ring-seine boats of the north. The former resulted in multiple investors for every boat, while the latter meant that even a small difference in the per-unit price of fish in two markets could make a huge difference to the overall earnings of a boat. The many investors of a ring-seine boat were often drawn strategically from multiple markets so that the fishers had a trusted auctioneer in different markets. Further, all-season landing centers were also closer together on the northern coast. Putting all of this together, it became clear that fishers in north Kerala found it feasible to consider selling at other nearby markets if the difference in profits by doing so was large enough. This was true for the boats with large catches, not so much for the smaller boats. As a result, the fishers for whom price was most important even in the north were the ones fishing in ring-seine boats and trawlers. In the south, where investments were lower, most boats had only a single person invest and auction for them. Thus, they sold primarily only at that auctioneer's beach regardless of the price.[30] Moreover, since all-season landing centers in the south were farther apart, selling elsewhere proved even less attractive when price differences were minor. Consequently, in general, fishers in the south

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were not really interested in price information for other markets nor did they use price information as their primary decision-making parameter.

## THE BUYERS

A similar pattern was visible among buyers as well, with export agents and large wholesalers being more concerned about the price in different markets than the small-scale fish vendors on their cycles and autos. Purchasers for export companies noted that export companies would provide them a price range and quantities of specific varieties that they would need to procure on a given day.[31] The companies would have decided this early in the day based on currency exchange rates and their schedule for sending out containers from the port that day. These export agents would then scout out different markets, fish supplies, and prices at those markets with the help of auctioneers at those markets to make decisions about where to procure fish.

Wholesale merchants who sold to smaller vendors and large hotels also spoke of keeping track of supply and price across two or three markets to decide where they would send their lorries (sometimes crossing state boundaries into Tamil Nadu) to pick up fish.[32] Even in these cases, however, the calculation of what prices were worth buying at was far from straightforward, as I had discussed in the section on the production of price. For instance, Nadeem noted that "Yesterday, my son went to Neendakara [north of Thiruvanthapuram] at 5 a.m., but nothing was available and so he returned." When I asked if his son did not call up to find out beforehand if fish was available in a market, Nadeem said this was not possible since "he has to be [there] early in the morning. If we get fish there, that's good. Else . . ." Thus, merchants could not always wait to gauge price before sending lorries to pick up fish and operated with the knowledge that they might return empty-handed despite their price-scouting activities. Those operating at such scales did use a number of strategies to reduce this possibility, however. Nadeem continued, for instance, by saying,

> Now, today, we will go to Kanyakumari [in Tamil Nadu], not to Neendakara. [I asked: because the prices in Kanyakumari are low?] No, not exactly. But [there are] no merchants there. Yesterday was expensive, [and it] stayed expensive since no one was there to buy. Tomorrow, since people are going there, prices should come down—that is what we hope for and that is why we are going there. If it's slightly high, we will bring lesser quantities; else we will get more from there.

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Meanwhile, the smaller-scale vendors I mentioned earlier said they had two or three regular beaches where they went to procure their fish day after day and a fixed market or customers (including restaurants) to whom they sold.[33] While price certainly mattered, as I elaborated earlier, it was far from being the primary criterion in their decisions on what varieties to buy, where to buy it from, or who to sell it to. Take for instance Ismail, who sold from a stall at one of the main fish markets in Thiruvananthapuram and had been working this trade for forty odd years. He bought from two to three markets and supplied fish to fifteen restaurants regularly in return for a commission. Ismail said restaurant owners often called to let him know the variety and quantity of fish they required ("Some will ask for seer fish; I am the only one supplying that here"); some even provided him cash in advance and specified how much he should spend that day on purchasing fish. However, Ismail said he bought a range of varieties every day whatever their cost since he had a few different customers.

Ismail, as well as others like Maria who also sold in the same market but to individual customers, seldom seemed to decide whether to buy fish based solely on their per-unit price. They also did not make phone calls to various landing sites and markets to find out and compare prices, though they did call relatively regularly to figure out if specific varieties of fish were available on a given day. This was particularly true when regular customers (individuals as well as establishments such as restaurants) had called them on a given day to ask for that specific variety.

Vendors operating at an even smaller scale than Ismail, such as Lily (whom we met in an earlier vignette buying fish in Vizhinjam and then selling it at a small market outside of Thiruvananthapuram) and others who sold fish from semipermanent roadside stalls in Thiruvananthapuram city, had two to three regular landing sites or markets in Kerala, and more recently in Tamil Nadu, that they would buy from.[34] They would sell to a combination of regular customers at multiple permanent and makeshift markets as well as to individual residences. These vendors also tended to investigate whether their regular procurement sites had a supply of fish (rather than evaluate between them based on price) before they headed out to them by bus or auto at 2 or 3 a.m. Further, even in cases where this category of vendors (and especially female vendors) saw price as an important element of their decision making, they were less able to follow that up with immediate travel to particular sites of purchase because few of them had access to private transport.

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In summary, then, I found out that gauging price prior to trading mattered to different degrees across the range of producers and buyers, and across the north and south. It mattered the most at higher volumes of fish and higher investment levels with higher profit opportunities, that is, to the fishers, investors, and buyers at the higher end of the scale of operations and who were also the relatively more affluent market actors in that industry. To the extent that price information was valued and being leveraged in decision-making in the fish supply chain, these were the actors who were relatively active and able to do so successfully.

## THE POLITICS OF PRICE INFORMATION

Far from the popular depiction of price information in ICTD that sees it as a neutral economic input that automatically emerges, I have argued in this chapter that price and price information are always actively constructed. Moreover, even once price information is constructed, access to it, its value in transactions, and an ability to leverage it are all shaped by the local political economy. Thus, fishworkers' movements in Kerala—especially the systematization of a public auction—had shaped (in theory, granted) access to price information to all actors in the fishing supply chain in the state. More recently, mobile phones made it possible to access such price information remotely. But not everyone had access to mobile phones, and not all individuals valued price information and/or were able to leverage it to improve their livelihoods even if they had access to phones. Sellers and buyers with larger scales of operation were almost always more concerned about price information than were smaller-scale operatives. Further, almost nobody, particularly among the smaller-scale operatives, used price information as the primary factor in their decisions on whom or from where to buy or sell fish. Instead, a number of factors including the maintenance of trading relationships and balancing domestic and work responsibilities (or work and rest) went into such decisions.

Besides the construction, circulation, and constraints of price information in practice, the larger goal of this chapter was to understand what happens when price information is understood as a well-defined, neutral economic input, as an objective fact that circulates as per economic laws and is assumed to be equally valuable for all. When the emphasis shifts to information, this chapter suggests, the role of social relations gets obscured. In the case of the

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Kerala fishers and their mobile phones, a discourse that foregrounded price information simultaneously ended up denying the role of politics in the construction and operation of price. Yet, in practice, I found that gender and class relations strongly determined who was able to influence how price was constructed in the first place and then access and leverage that price information effectively.

What this chapter also illustrated is that unpacking price information and paying attention to the processes surrounding its circulation introduces us to diverse actors and their ways of regarding and evaluating information. Methodologically, I operationalized this "unpacking" by taking an ethnographic approach and attending carefully to the channels, forms, and agents of communication (i.e., the information order) operational in the fishing markets of Kerala. Chapters 7 and 8 will further explore how using the information order lens enabled me to make visible the social and material roots of information that are otherwise absent or obscured in conversations about price information.

## CONCLUSION

The Nobel Prize–winning economist Friedrich Hayek (1945) argues that the most significant aspect of a price system as a mechanism for communicating information is "the economy of knowledge by which it operates, or how little the individual participants need to know in order to be able to take the right action" (526–527). By focusing on the information order of Kerala's fishing markets, this chapter has argued the opposite, showing how *much* every fisher needed to know to operate in their market and community and how little price information seemed to convey toward that goal.[35]

The case of a popular economic analysis of the Kerala fishers' use of mobile phones and price information can be seen as one of politics denied, animated as it was by a focus on information as the central agent of social and economic change. But what happens if an information-centered initiative acknowledges the existence of politics and nevertheless decides to bracket it in its work? In the next chapter, I examine one such case and its implications using the case of the Swaminathan Foundation's Information Village Research Project.

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5

# POLITICS BRACKETED: CRAFTING INFORMED CITIZENS AT VILLAGE INFORMATION CENTERS

## INTRODUCTION

Kilipet village looked a little different when I got off the bus that day.[1] The road was festooned with plants, while paper flags fluttered overhead. Prominently placed billboards on either side of the main road marked the entrance to the village. The boards featured photographs and messages of welcome for a local politician. There was a bustle of activity centered on a plot of unoccupied land opposite the local VKC. Clearly, something big was afoot.

The VKC itself was locked, and I went on to the VKC operator's house to ask her what was happening in the village that day. Even before I could reach the house, I saw the operator's ten-year-old daughter on the street. She told me that a politician had visited the village in the morning to inaugurate a gym on the vacant plot of land. A feast followed the inauguration ceremony. When I asked the girl if she had partaken of the feast, she stared back incredulously. "I can't go there," she said. "He [the guest of honor] is not from my father's kutchi [party]."

—Fieldnotes from Kilipet, October 2009

I found this episode in my fieldnotes from my time in Kilipet quite telling. If a ten-year-old thought of the inauguration of a community gym and eating at a communal feast in terms of party affiliations, was it conceivable that any aspect of living in Kilipet could be delinked from politics, organized or otherwise? The episode encapsulated in a moment what I had found over days of talking to residents of Kilipet: the centrality and acute awareness of politics, including but not restricted to organized party politics, in the everyday lives of residents in this village. Yet, the Swaminathan Foundation's information village project IVRP had envisioned the Kilipet VKC as an apolitical intervention in the village. To what extent did the foundation

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Figure 5.1
The main road in Kilipet, Puducherry, after a gym inauguration by a politician. The VKC is in the background. Photograph by the author (2009).

succeed in achieving this goal? Using the case of the Kilipet VKC, I argue in this chapter that the definition, creation, provision, and use of information is *always* political, whether or not an initiative frames it thus.

Chapter 4 highlighted the circulation of price information in fish markets of Kerala. The Kerala case has largely been interpreted as an instance of smoother information flows leading naturally to more efficient markets and, in turn, to better prices for producers and consumers alike. This understanding has focused primarily on how market mechanisms first helped correct information asymmetries through the introduction of mobile phones and then went on to reshape the working of the market. In this chapter, I shift from that view to the Swaminathan Foundation's IVRP, which made an intentional intervention in information provision to improve livelihood opportunities.

As chapter 3 explained in detail, VKCs came up as part of the IVRP in 1998 in Puducherry province in south India. The IVRP, which quickly rose to become the poster child of the information kiosk and ICTD practitioner communities, was envisioned as a project focused on "information shops"

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(later renamed "village knowledge centres" or "VKCs") where information would be transacted (sought, produced, provided, or consumed). The project's first phase was funded by the IDRC whose research interests were in line with the project's goal of catering to the information needs of village residents. As part of the IVRP, a central hub with internet connectivity was linked to experts, while village-level information shops or VKCs, such as the one in Kilipet, connected to this hub with a mix of wired and wireless technologies to transact information. Toward this, VKCs contained a personal computer, printer, display board, public announcement system, and equipment for data transmission and receiving. In keeping with the foundation's larger goals of attending to information-poverty and improving the nature and efficacy of interactions with the state, one of the important categories of information VKCs provided was government information, including the rules and timelines of public entitlement schemes. This too was different than the Kerala case where the focus was on economic (and more specifically price) information.

Besides these dimensions, the IVRP also differed from the Kerala case in another way. I pointed out in the previous chapter that the popular treatment of the Kerala case has largely denied the politics of how price information is produced, accessed, and leveraged. But the IVRP did not deny politics—instead, it bracketed politics. To the extent that local politics was seen as the business of village-level councils (as explained in chapter 3) and information shops were encouraged to stay away from it at the time of this research, the work of VKCs was not seen as intertwined with village-level politics or as inherently political. But I found that, in practice, the Kilipet VKC and its operators became involved in the creation and verification of social facts for the state, were drawn on as valuable resources for petitioning the state, and were deemed irrelevant in arenas where they chose to stay away from politics. Unlike the information village envisioned in the foundation's initial documents, by 2009, "information production" and "information consumption" at the VKC were fundamentally constituted by the range of politics operating in the village.

I construct my account of the working of the Kilipet VKC based on my participant observation work in Kilipet and conversations with VKC operators called "knowledge workers" (KWs), Kilipet residents, Swaminathan Foundation personnel, and state functionaries between August and November 2009. I began my work by visiting a number of VKCs. I also spent time

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with operators at the centers and at meetings organized at the hub and at individual VKCs. I decided to focus on the center in Kilipet because of its location in a village that was broadly understood as marginalized and because its population was precisely the kind of target group whose livelihoods the IVRP most wanted to benefit through the provision of information.

As with the Kerala case, taking an ethnographic approach allowed me to use multiple methods and sources (observation, interviews, and project documentation) to make sense of my site. A focus on understanding information circulation in Kilipet and the IVRP's own terms meant that I spoke not just to the obvious "providers" of information at VKCs (center operators) and its consumers (village residents) but also to intermediaries, nonusers, and providers and consumers who were not obvious. Together, this allowed me to make sense of the VKC's information provision activities in the context of Kilipet's information order.

Following a description of Kilipet and Kilipet VKC, I examine what Kilipet KWs, residents, Swaminathan Foundation personnel, and state functionaries perceived to be the role and relevance of the VKC in Kilipet. Along the way, I identify the processes of creation, provision, and use of government information in the village, as well as the VKC's relationship to these processes. I leverage these analyses to argue that the circulation of information is always political; however, certain ways of framing information make aspects of the politics harder to see. The chapter concludes that information can neither be pried apart from the rest of social life nor can its politics be purposefully set aside.

## KILIPET VKC

Located 12 km from the village resource centre (referred to as the hub from here on) in Pillayarkuppam, and 16 km from the closest city (Pondicherry), the Kilipet community consisted of about 150 households and just over 700 individuals in 2009.[2] Like several other VKC sites, Kilipet was a village that was familiar to the Swaminathan Foundation through its earlier interventions and projects in the region. The VKC itself was a one-room brick-and-cement building located on the Kilipet main road, with signs on its outside walls that prominently identified its association with the foundation and as a computer training center. Adjacent to the entrance, current news items of interest were written on a blackboard with chalk. Antennae and a pole with

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four attached loudspeakers further set the VKC apart from other structures in its neighborhood. Inside, the VKC was furnished with a bench and a long table with three desktop computers on it. (I found out later that one or more of the systems tended to be out of use and in need of repair at any given time.) These computers were earmarked for students. Along a second wall was a desk with a desktop computer, speakers, printer, an uninterrupted power supply (UPS), and controls for the PA system. This computer was used either by the KW for entering records of VKC usage from user registers or by local expert users. The walls of the VKC were as densely packed as the rest of the room, with calendars and posters in Tamil and in English. Also taped on the wall was a printout of the village map created by one of the earlier KWs (see figure 5.2 below).

On my first visit to Kilipet VKC, I met one of its two KWs, Lakshmi.[3] In her mid-thirties, Lakshmi had already been working as a KW for four years when I met her. She introduced me to the services offered at Kilipet VKC. Besides training users in information technology skills, Lakshmi mentioned that the VKC would provide

> education and agriculture-related thagaval [information], thagaval about government help to people with disabilities, about openings in small industries work. . . . We announce when rations are being distributed at the [government-run] ration shop. We also announced about 100-days work and the making of job cards [this scheme and its procedures are explained later in the chapter]. . . . We announce when loan repayment waivers are granted.

The content for these announcements came from newspapers, the hub, or conversations with other KWs over the bright red coin-operated telephone housed in a corner of the VKC. Details on government-funded schemes and opportunities were also written up on the blackboard outside the VKC and announced on the PA system.[4] Additionally, KWs used the VKC printer to print out government forms for residents and then helped them fill the forms out.

Further, since KWs were supposed to know the village and its residents, government officers also came to them for assistance. Lakshmi mentioned that

> Officers visit us all the time. They even ask us to verify particulars such as whether people are actually below poverty line or landless as they claim in their applications. They come to verify when a house is burnt down [inhabitants of burnt houses receive some relief payments].

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By the end of my conversation with Lakshmi, I had some sense of the services offered at the VKC and by the KWs.[5] But upon returning to the Kilipet VKC day after day, I realized that I had to look *beyond* it to understand why some services attracted more people than others, or why some people visited the VKC while others did not. I "looked beyond" the Kilipet VKC spatially (to understand the layout of the village, its place within the panchayat, and the organization of community assets within the panchayat), historically (to understand the geographical conditions and caste history that had shaped occupation patterns and the interaction of communities in Kilipet), and politically (to understand the political factions among which the VKC operated).

## KILIPET BEYOND THE VKC

The road on which the VKC was located was crucial to Kilipet since the only mode of public transit to and from the village plied along this road. The road

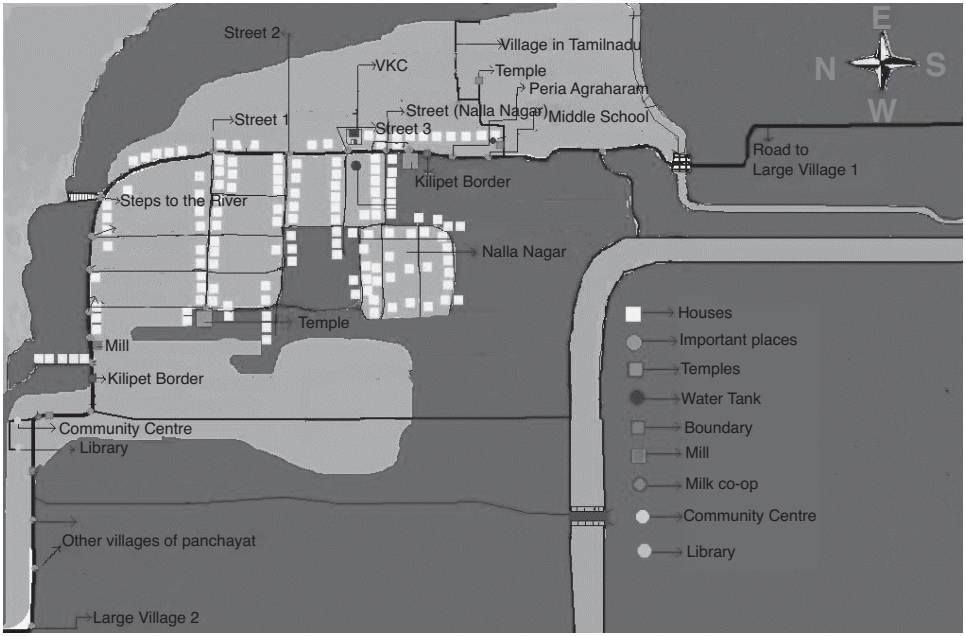


Figure 5.2
Village map created by a former knowledge worker using the computer at the Kilipet VKC. The text in the original was in Tamil and contained place names that have been anonymized.

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led to larger villages in either direction. In one direction, it led to the local middle school and the boundary of a neighboring village, Peria Agraharam, which was part of the same panchayat as Kilipet, and further to other villages in the neighboring panchayat (large village #1). In the other direction, it led to another large village (large village #2) and also to various government offices and the city of Pondicherry.

While the Kilipet main road described above had a few houses and a grocery store, most houses were located on three other streets of the village. Some of these houses had concrete roofs, often associated with permanence and relative financial stability. But many had temporary thatched roofs, and a few houses were under construction. In addition, there were about thirty houses on a piece of land that a former member of the legislative assembly (an elected politician at the state level) had bought for the villagers when their homes were demolished following the widening of the main road. This land had been allotted to residents using tokens and was now called "Nalla Nagar." Nalla Nagar had no roads and no water connection or authorized electricity connections since none of the residents possessed pattas (land certificates) for the land on which their houses were built. Because of the uncertain status of pattas, all houses in Nalla Nagar were thatched and temporary structures.

Figure 5.3
Houses on one of Kilipet's cemented streets. Photograph by the author (2009).

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Figure 5.4
Porch and entrance of a house on the Kilipet main road. Photograph by the author (2009).

In the 1950s, a flood had forced the Kilipet community to move from the banks of a river to their present location, a move responsible for some of the present-day land issues in the village.[6] If a river was historically responsible for Kilipet's present geographical location, the history of caste divisions in the region dictated its place within the spatial organization of the panchayat and its distance from the panchayat's assets and resources. Kilipet is a Scheduled Caste (SC) or dalit village flanked on all sides by Backward Caste (BC) villages. Since traditional village councils were the only decision-making body for the village till the panchayat elections in 2007, Kilipet residents claimed that the BC-dominated village councils brought infrastructure and facilities to only the BC villages. As a result, shared facilities such as the library, community hall, ration shop, cooperative bank, and middle school were all located in one of the BC villages of the panchayat. Administrative offices such as the village administrative officer's (VAO's) office or commune panchayat were even farther away, located beyond the panchayat and in larger villages or towns.[7] In combination with poor

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public transit connections, Kilipet was a comparatively inaccessible village by the standards of rural Puducherry, and Kilipet residents were keenly aware of their standing as a "backward" village.

Economic and occupational opportunities had historically overlapped with caste lines in the panchayat. Kilipet residents had little land of their own.[8] Residents typically had between 0.25 and 0.75 acres of land (if they had land at all), and families worked their small piece of land themselves. However, since a land holding this size was not enough to support a household in the region, most Kilipet residents worked as casual agricultural laborers ("coolies") in neighboring villages for a living.[9] In the past, they had worked on the land of higher-caste landowners (mostly of the Gounder community which is classified as BC in the region) in the adjacent village of Peria Agraharam. However, as land was increasingly sold off as plots to real estate agencies in response to a rising demand for residential and commercial space, even this requirement for agricultural laborers had declined. As a result, residents needed to travel farther to find coolie work. Further, most individuals belonging to the older generation had not had the opportunity or financial capacity to enroll in formal school-based education; nor did they have the social connections that could have helped them land a job in the public or private sector. In fact, the lack of the right social connections made jobs difficult to come by even for the few recent college graduates of the village. For the most part, Kilipet residents had to step out of the village to access any economic or educational resources and opportunities. In fact, Kilipet streets were mostly deserted during the day (9 a.m. to 4 p.m.), with a large percentage of the adults going out for agricultural coolie work or other odd jobs, while kids and young adults went to school or college. The deserted streets of the village during the day, and the importance of the bus in the daily schedule of Kilipet residents, reflected the extent to which life in Kilipet was structured by its connections with neighboring villages and with the city of Pondicherry.[10]

The Kilipet VKC was also shaped by the complicated political terrain of the village within which it worked. In one of my first visits to Kilipet to inquire about the working of the VKC in the village, I came across a household of two brothers and their families in the main village.[11] The elder brother, after explaining the educational objective of the range of announcements being made through the VKC, paused and said: "no education is good in this village because the politics is bad." He went on to say that every job

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and every opportunity required political connections. Nothing could be achieved in the village without arasiyal (politics). "I only survive because I have political connections," he added, reminding me that he worked with a political party. There were others like him in the village, associated formally or informally, full time or part time, with political parties or factions. Kilipet residents referred to these individuals as "mukkiyamaanavanga," or "important people."[12] The relationship between parties, party candidates, and their supporters was most visible during state- or national-level elections when supporters would be involved in bribing voters to vote in favor of their candidate. But it carried on beyond the elections. These supporters were widely perceived to be the ones who ended up with the goodies of every welfare scheme, a belief reflected in statements such as "only the twenty people who supported the MLA in the elections received the free gas cylinders."[13]

Several aspects of this political scape were related to Puducherry's administrative status as a Union Territory and its size, which meant that elected members of the Puducherry Legislative Assembly (or MLAs) were more visible and proximate at the village level compared to larger Indian states. Even with the introduction of elected village-level councils (panchayats) and decentralization of powers in Puducherry, MLAs held on to their political clout and influence.[14] The fact that Puducherry panchayats had only recently been operationalized on the ground and were themselves unclear about their powers and role in 2009 further strengthened the hold of MLAs and traditional (unelected) village council leaders in Kilipet.[15] Nor did politics in Kilipet operate just through formal party politics and affiliations or organized political action. Instead, it worked through complicated networks that were shaped by the past career trajectories of politicians as well as by kinship and caste. Panchayat members and residents associated with self-help groups (SHGs) or the traditional panchayat also had their spheres of influence within and outside the village. It was within these overlapping or conflicting spheres of influence and concerns of all these groups and individuals that any activity in the village, especially an external intervention such as the Kilipet VKC, has to be understood.

Given this spatial, historical, and political ordering of social relations in Kilipet, how did the various actors encountering the Kilipet VKC—KWs, Kilipet residents, state agents, and the Swaminathan Foundation—perceive its working and its position in Kilipet? I examine this next before getting to

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how this influenced each group's understanding of information, access to it, and ability to leverage it.

## PERCEPTIONS OF UTILITY: DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW ON THE VKC

### KILIPET VKC FOR ITS KNOWLEDGE WORKERS

Rajendran was one of the founders of the Kilipet VKC and had also worked there as a KW for its first four years. He saw a role for the VKC in Kilipet, saying it had helped especially with government schemes and the provision of certificates while he was the KW:

> [About government schemes] We did not restrict ourselves to the SC welfare department and talked about training sessions by other departments. Also, we would gather training opportunities from the newspapers and write those out as well. I went and fished out these announcements as well. For students, when they transferred from class eight to nine, or for scholarships after class six, they required certificates. They would need income and caste certificates, nativity . . . they would write their applications [for certificates] by hand. The applications had to be stamped at the tahsildar's [revenue official], then go to the karanam [VAO], then the revenue inspector, then to the deputy tahsildar. So, we had been getting these certificates for residents [prior to the VKC, while working with the village youth group]. With the computer, we started printing out applications. We also printed out training details.

Rajendran also involved himself in the procurement of government certificates for residents in the initial years of the VKC, accompanying people to government offices and helping them through the process. He explained that because of his earlier affiliation with a local youth club, he had learned a lot about these processes and had also developed an acquaintance with lower-level bureaucrats.[16] Both of these factors helped Rajendran facilitate the certificate procurement process for Kilipet residents. Another former KW Velvizhi emphasized, meanwhile, that her status as a "fellow" affiliated with the foundation had helped her enter government offices that she would otherwise have not been allowed into.[17] Her point was that being associated with the VKC or the foundation helped gain entry into offices and in transactions with bureaucrats, which was a helpful first step to sorting out problems.

For Rajendran, one of the most attractive propositions offered by the IVRP at its inception was that it had promised to install a database of government

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schemes at VKCs.[18] He explained why this was helpful. Earlier, one could only ask bureaucrats specific questions about a given scheme. If someone asked them to list all schemes that residents were eligible for, they would almost definitely not oblige. Having a database of schemes helped ask specific questions, which was why the database had been useful in the first few years of the VKC's operation. Rajendran lamented that over the years the database had not been regularly updated, which reduced its utility. Hardly anyone, including the KWs, looked at the database anymore. Schemes were announced only when newspapers carried details about them, which typically happened only for newly announced schemes and not for continuing schemes.[19]

Another KW I met was Tamilselvi, who was also the second KW at the VKC when I visited in 2009. A middle-aged woman, she lived in a house directly opposite the VKC with her husband, who was an elected member of the panchayat, and their three children. Tamilselvi also ran a shop in the village. She had helped start the Kilipet VKC but had to leave after a year because she could not manage her shop while being a KW. But she returned to being a KW in 2008, by which time KWs were being paid a small monthly salary by the foundation. Tamilselvi related that before she started work as a KW, she did not know much about government schemes and job opportunities. Now, people sometimes sought her and Lakshmi out to ask them about such things. If she or Lakshmi knew the answer, they let people know immediately; otherwise, they found out from the hub and then let residents know. Given all the benefits that the VKC had brought to Kilipet, she claimed that she and her fellow KW never stopped anyone visiting and "only welcomed everyone" to the VKC. In addition,

> I tell students to apply [for jobs based on advertisements in newspapers]. We also type and print job applications or call up the office and get applications from them. Also, recently there was a drive to apply for land or for pattas. We also filled up these forms for some people.
>
> People know in advance what they will get for free from the government: seeds, implements. [Once] we announced first, and people took their vehicles and rushed to the office, said they heard about it through the announcement. Earlier, how would they [people from the government] have gone farmer to farmer and told everyone? We just see it in the newspaper and announce. When we announced a Rs.1,000 subsidy, everyone filled out forms . . . Earlier, they would have had to visit the Block Development office, the commune panchayat.

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> Now, it's not like that, anybody can go since they know the questions to ask. . . . Then there are free gas cylinders, marriage, death, birth registrations.[20]

To emphasize the impact of these announcements, Tamilselvi joked that after her monthly announcements about old-age pensions being disbursed, "even corpses would get up and walk to the pension office." The latest important government scheme announcement Tamilselvi recalled making was about applying for a "job card" to be eligible to participate in the 100-days work (or the National Rural Employment Guarantee) scheme. "We even helped residents fill up the application forms and told them where to get pictures taken," she added.

Rajendran and Tamilselvi both talked of the tenuous relationship between their village and the neighboring BC village, Peria Agraharam, and how that relationship affected how the VKC was used. According to Rajendran, "The SC/BC divide is clear in the operation of the VKC. The BCs wanted the VKC in their region and the fact that they didn't get it definitely hurt their ego."

Tamilselvi too noted that

> We announce agriculture-related messages. The Gounders [who are a BC community] would never tell any of this to our village. They won't tell the SC people. Why should we depend on them? That's why we decided that such news can be routed through the VKC. Prior to the VKC, folks from the bank would come down for verification sometimes and we would find that the BC people had taken loans in our names! Now our people go to the bank themselves to get loans.

It is difficult to establish that the VKC effected such a shift by itself or even that a dramatic shift had indeed taken place.[21] But in terms of perceptions or the value placed on the VKC, the idea of the VKC as a community resource and an alternative source or channel was an important one in Kilipet, especially among KWs.[22] "We must not let the VKC go," said Velvizhi the former KW and foundation fellow mentioned earlier. "It is the only resource we have." She also pointed to a campaign she had been part of a few years back when there was a proposal to demolish the VKC as part of a road-widening project.[23] KWs and concerned residents had submitted an application to the commune-level panchayat office at the time, as had the Swaminathan Foundation. They visited the office multiple times to convince the officers that the village needed the VKC. Eventually, the panchayat agreed and the VKC stayed.

Most of the other KWs who had worked at the VKC for any length of time were younger than the KWs introduced so far.[24] In their narration of

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the working of the VKC, computer education came up as the most important service provided at the VKC.[25] They said they learned how to handle and operate computers for the very first time at the VKC. Some of them went on to work as volunteers or paid KWs. Once they joined college or work, they moved on. One young man had even interned as a computer operator at a local government office, a job that he got through the VKC.[26] Occasionally, these men would help out the current KWs or come by the VKC for a visit. However, few considered being a KW a viable career option in the future.

Rajendran, Tamilselvi, Lakshmi, and other KWs talked in glowing terms about the benefits of the VKC for Kilipet residents at large, and for themselves, as an opportunity to improve their skills and establish connections (as with the KW who interned at a government office or the one who gained entry into government offices). But none of them saw working at the VKC as a financially viable option. One of the fundamental reasons behind this was the nominal monthly salary that KWs were paid. So nominal was this amount that KWs said they had brought it up repeatedly at the monthly KW meeting at the hub. In parallel, KWs discussed this issue among themselves and organized a strike in late 2009.[27] The foundation had been promising to look into the matter but personnel at the hub confessed that they absolutely did not have the means to spend more on the VKCs.[28] In the meantime, the VKCs continued to function: KWs with other opportunities moved on, and those without alternatives kept working, holding on half-heartedly to the expectation of a salary hike in the future.

## KILIPET VKC FOR VILLAGE RESIDENTS

Even as KWs focused on the database of government schemes, announcements, and computer education as important aspects of the Kilipet VKC's work, Kilipet residents had their own take on the place and role of the VKC. Some of this overlapped with what the KWs had told me. For example, I found that the focus on computer education was not limited to young KWs: other village residents shared that enthusiasm and saw computer education as the most important possibility offered by the VKC. Resident after resident repeated that the VKC could be where their kids learned computers. Sometimes, this was said amid remarks appreciating the VKC, and, at other times, to point to the potential of the VKC that was currently being squandered.[29] Either way, the perceived connection between VKCs and their contribution in exposing children to computers was hard to miss.[30]

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Besides computer education and computer certification courses that were offered at the Kilipet VKC, the other most visible—rather, audible—aspect of the VKC was the announcements on the PA system. Most people identified the VKC through its association with the computer and these announcements (often describing the VKC as "where they teach computers to children," "from where they make announcements," or "from where they speak on the mic"). Tamilselvi was especially proud of an innovation they had used to get people's attention: prefacing announcements with the signature tune of the popular Tamil television channel, Sun News. On being asked about the announcements being made from the VKC, people mentioned government schemes and employment opportunities the most. A common response from village residents would be

> They tell us about the nanmai [welfare] being done by the government. They announce when rice or saris are being distributed free of cost [under various public schemes] . . . when pensions are ready for disbursement, or loan waivers are announced by leaders.

Recent announcements regarding a public camp to apply for a marriage certificate or register for a job card under the 100-days work scheme came up repeatedly as specific examples of announcements in conversations with residents.[31]

However, the ways in which residents and KWs talked about the VKC did not always overlap. Nor did all village residents talk about the VKC in the same way since not all of them used it equally or in similar ways. Age and gender were significant factors shaping who visited or made use of the VKC.[32] So was caste, with few people from the neighboring BC villages visiting the VKC.[33] Also, even though the VKC had female KWs (including at the time of my research), female users older than ten were difficult to spot at the VKC.[34] In addition to caste and gender, a KW's place in the networks within the village also shaped to a great extent who used the VKCs and who elected to stay away, as did residents' relationships with the foundation.[35]

My conversations with residents about their use of the VKC moved on seamlessly to other problems that residents saw as central to their lives. The first category of problems they brought up included issues seen as directly connected to the VKC, such as the 100-days work scheme about which the VKC had made announcements. A second category consisted of problems that residents wanted the VKC or the foundation to help them with, even

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if the VKC had nothing to do with the problem directly. This included issues like helping residents obtain a patta. A final category of problems was when residents felt that a problem was so big that it fundamentally shaped their lives. Even if the problem was not directly connected to the VKC in any way, the VKC could not fundamentally contribute to their lives till it was sorted out. The "64-evidence," which I describe later, is an example of this category of problems. I discuss one example from each of these categories in sequence, building a description of the issues from my conversations with village residents, the elected panchayat president, and an elected ward member.

WHERE THE VKC WAS DIRECTLY CONNECTED: 100-DAYS WORK SCHEME The Indian government's flagship employment guarantee scheme (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, or MGNREGS) was known in Puducherry as "100-days work," 100 being the number of days of employment in a year that the scheme guaranteed to every rural Indian household. The nature of the work itself was supposed to be decided by village residents and conveyed through the panchayat to the Block Development Office (BDO), which in turn approved and channeled funding from the central government for that work. The scheme was implemented in Puducherry starting in 2008, and the VKC was its face in Kilipet. It was the VKC in consultation with the Block office that announced the dates and procedure for obtaining "job cards"—job cards were essential to demand work under the scheme. The 100-days work program provided only minimum wage. But for those in Kilipet who had no other employment opportunities with the drying up of agricultural work, the guarantee of work itself provided some security.[36] As a result, several interested residents had applied for and obtained job cards following the announcement made by the VKC in 2008.

Although residents were keen for the scheme to begin in their village, no work had started in Kilipet as of November 2009, more than a year after the scheme was announced.[37] According to the panchayat president, there were no funds for the project, a statement that the Kilipet ward member repeated.[38] Personnel at the BDO, however, said that funds were available. But they needed to get work plans from the panchayat president to start work or release funds.[39] Since the scheme was panchayat-centered, the BDO could not dictate terms and typically took the president's word for what a panchayat wanted. In Kilipet's case, the office said, the president had shown little interest.

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Residents with job cards appeared unsure where to inquire about the scheme. Some of them had inquired at the VKC since the initial announcement had come from the VKC. Others did not think the VKC would know anything and went to elected leaders instead. On asking the panchayat president and their local ward member, they were repeatedly told that there were no funds or that it was the rainy season and that "work will commence soon." Yet others had heard that there was no scope for work to be undertaken in their panchayat even if it was being undertaken in surrounding panchayats.[40] Some residents were resigned and others cynical about 100-days work ever starting up in their village. They took it as a reflection of all else that was going wrong in Kilipet. "In everything, this village is a 'waste,'" said a middle-aged man, adding "this village is an orphan; no one does anything for it."[41]

WHERE THE VKC COULD HELP: PATTA (LAND CERTIFICATE) If 100-days work was associated with the VKC in residents' minds because of the initial announcement, they associated pattas (land certificates) with it because of what they hoped the VKC or foundation could do: use its reputation and connections in the bureaucracy to resolve the patta problem in Kilipet. As mentioned earlier, few in Kilipet had much agricultural land. However, many did have temporary pattas for the land on which their dwelling stood and to which they had moved following a flood decades ago.[42] While temporary pattas could be used just like a regular patta in some respects, there were definite constraints on their usage. An important difference was that a temporary patta could not be modified and the details of ownership on it could not be changed unless it was converted into a permanent patta. As a result, when the people in whose names temporary pattas had been issued died, their family members no longer held a valid patta that could be used, for example, to apply for schemes where a patta was a prerequisite.

Meanwhile, residents of Nalla Nagar faced a different set of problems. Nalla Nagar came into being in 2004 when houses on the main road were demolished following road-widening operations. The local MLA at the time had bought the land on which Nalla Nagar now stands and allotted parcels from it, mainly to residents whose houses were slated to be demolished.[43] The patta for the land remained with the MLA, while the residents were allotted land based on a token system. As a result, residents did not possess individual pattas for the land on which their dwellings stood. Kilipet residents were still praising the MLA's act when I spoke with them

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in 2009. Unfortunately, they had not expressed their appreciation in the form of votes, instead electing a rival candidate in the elections following the allotment of tokens for land.[44] Since that time, Nalla Nagar residents, in particular, were caught in the crossfire between the former and current MLAs of the constituency: the former MLA complained that he could not do anything for an ungrateful people who did not bother to vote for him following his kind act, while the current MLA claimed that he could do nothing as he had nothing to do with the land in Nalla Nagar. Astute observers among village residents remarked that the land was now selling at lakhs of rupees and there was no reason for the former MLA to ever have issued individual pattas for it. Moreover, the land provided him such a hold over the village that it would be foolish of him to make over the patta to Nalla Nagar residents.

Residents who did not have pattas for either of the reasons mentioned above found themselves in a difficult situation. As a group of residents put it:

> Now for the first time, and only since the last fifteen years or so, the government is offering loans even to those without assets or much property. Even we can do something with our lives. But it's unfortunate that we can't even avail [ourselves] of these loans because we don't have pattas.[45]

New government schemes offered low-interest loans and subsidies for those wanting to build a house. A patta was required while applying for these schemes and also while applying for the provision of services such as an electricity or water connection. As a result, many residents could not apply for loans and Nalla Nagar residents could not apply for legal electricity connections or for a community water tap.[46]

It is worth noting here that from the residents' point of view, the problem was not so much that they did not "have information" about government schemes. It was that they could not make use of what they knew about schemes or loans without a patta. Over the years, groups of residents had tried a variety of methods to get pattas. They had protested and appealed to the traditional and elected panchayat presidents, MLAs, lower-level bureaucrats, the collector, and the CM. The president, according to many, was no help in any matter related to the village because he belonged to the BC community. So far, Kilipet residents' actions had not brought them any closer to solutions. Meanwhile, organizing people to protest had become increasingly difficult, with people demanding money to protest or to take a day off from work.[47]

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The VKC's connection to a powerful NGO such as the Swaminathan Foundation meant that residents also approached the foundation through the VKC or through individuals associated with the foundation (SHG members or fellows affiliated with the foundation) with their patta problem. The foundation, thus, became another connection or resource through which residents approached leaders and decision-makers. Nothing came out of these attempts. However, the patta problem is an example of how the VKC got drawn into Kilipet's problems, but not so much through its information provision services. Instead, it was because of the foundation's social and political connections inside *and* outside Kilipet that it was sought out.

WHERE THE VKC CANNOT HELP: 64-EVIDENCE An example of the final category of problems that was brought up by residents was the "64-evidence." This was a problem that was not directly connected to the VKC, nor something that residents approached the VKC about. However, it was so central to their everyday lives that residents felt it had to be resolved before external interventions such as the VKC could fundamentally improve their everyday lives. The lack of 64-evidence constituted one such fundamental problem in the lives of many Kilipet residents.

The idea of 64-evidence came out of the state's need to identify "genuine" Puducherry citizens and filter out migrants from neighboring Tamil Nadu as recipients of welfare benefits. To establish this identity, people were required to prove that they or their ancestors lived in Puducherry in or prior to 1964. It was especially difficult to procure a caste certificate without establishing this identity. The caste certificate, in turn, was the most crucial for the SC community, which was entitled to many affirmative action benefits, including scholarships at schools, admissions to colleges, and employment opportunities in government offices under the SC quota. Without a caste certificate, each such potential opportunity in the career and work life of an individual of the SC community could turn into an obstacle. The most pressing consequence in present times was in school and college education, where students could not obtain a scholarship without a caste certificate and 64-evidence. In the absence of 64-evidence, students even had had to drop out of school if they could not afford to pay for school without a scholarship.

A majority of the Kilipet village population did not have 64-evidence for one of two reasons: they had migrated from Tamil Nadu after 1964

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(i.e., they were the ones the government was trying to filter out) or their families had been residents in Puducherry before 1964 but had no way to prove it. The first category of people without 64-evidence were recent migrants. Migrants often came to Puducherry from Tamil Nadu with the express purpose of leveraging its relatively generous welfare schemes and efficient administration. Some migrants argued that when even refugees from Sri Lanka were offered support by the government why should those arriving from Tamil Nadu be left behind?[48] On its end, the Puducherry government was concerned about the misuse of funds earmarked for *its* citizens and sought to prevent outsiders from using government funds or taking jobs. 64-evidence was one of the ways in which it attempted to prevent such misuse. The second category of people who did not have 64-evidence were those whose ancestors had indeed lived in the region since 1964 but had no way to prove it. This situation was also reasonably common in Kilipet for a variety of reasons. As a community that seldom received formal education, members of the SC community (particularly earlier generations) were mostly unlikely to know of procedures such as birth registration, especially since births until recently had mostly taken place at home. Nor would many members of the community have attended school or been registered at one which could have led to certificates/other documents. The group of coolie workers referred to earlier observed about their parents that:

> The system used to be such that the BCs even in earlier times have some kind of kurippu [used here in the sense of registration]. Our people never had time for anything but working on the fields of these people. They also never knew anything about rules.

The irony, then, was that 64-evidence, which was instituted to benefit the people of Puducherry, worked the worst for communities who were the most likely to need its benefits—those who did not realize the importance of being "registered" four decades back.[49]

Kilipet residents had tried various strategies to deal with the 64-evidence problem. Some had procured a written statement from members of the traditional panchayat supporting their residency claim. This had worked in a few cases but was not guaranteed to work with all government officials.[50] Others had tried to use their connections with political parties and MLAs to establish 64-evidence. Some had tried to hunt down old school records.[51] Those with no recourse to such alternatives had thought of other innovative ways

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to establish their residency. A Nalla Nagar resident and mother of three reminisced about her ordeal when her youngest son had to obtain a caste certificate and required 64-evidence.[52]

> Our parents did not know enough to get our births registered. So my husband did not have a birth registration and I don't either, though we are both from Pondicherry. The only thing I remembered was that the day I arrived as a bride in this village, another woman gave birth to a son. I remember that because people said I had brought good luck to the village since a boy was born the day I entered. I approached that family to determine the son's year and date of birth. I used that to prove I was in this village before 1964. Finally, it all worked out. But I remember the panic I felt. One hears of so many boys who commit suicide when they can't get a caste certificate. I was so scared.

Even as individual residents succeeded in obtaining 64-evidence for their families, the larger problem facing the community persisted.[53] Much like the patta problem, here again the residents might have had "information" about a scheme or the possibility of a loan, but they were not able to satisfy its prerequisites if it directly or indirectly required 64-evidence. As Palaniammal, the resident I introduced the book with, succinctly put it, "Of what use is this information?"[54]

Thus, in the case of 64-evidence, residents did not see the VKC as directly connected to their problem nor as a part of a solution to that problem. Since the problem was so significant in their lives, they did feel it had to be sorted out before initiatives such as the VKC could help them in a meaningful way. They also felt that this fundamental problem of the village was not about how much they knew about government schemes or procedures. It was simply about their inability to fulfil the conditions and prerequisites of these schemes and procedures.

I have attempted to show in this chapter that Kilipet residents related to the VKC and Swaminathan Foundation at many levels. They made use of a few services at the VKC. In other instances, they leveraged their connections with KWs, the VKC, or the foundation to gain entry into government offices or to register their point with government officials or leaders. But in some other cases, they did not see a role for the VKC. Not once, in any of these cases, did they themselves diagnose their problem as one of not knowing or of being "information-poor." They knew fully well what document they required to avail themselves of a scheme; they just did not *have* that document.

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## KILIPET VKC FOR THE FOUNDATION AND THE STATE

In the discussions on the role of KWs and the VKC so far, I have focused on what KWs thought they should be doing for village residents and what residents expected from them and from the VKC. But what did the foundation and "the state" expect of KWs and the VKC? I suggest that both the foundation and the state relied on KWs as experts who could tell them more about village residents and verify social facts for them.

For entities external to the village, such as the Swaminathan Foundation or government agencies, KWs were the insiders and experts who knew the village well. Indeed, the foundation relied on the KWs' insider and expert status when it asked them to create village profiles, maintain and cultivate linkages with local leaders and boundary partners, find locally feasible ways to generate a revenue for the VKC, or gauge the "information needs" of residents, in addition to their routine work of maintaining registers, teaching classes, making announcements, and keeping the VKC open to users every day. Besides the foundation, bureaucrats at government departments were also eager to leverage VKCs to reach a larger audience. According to the IVRP's advisor and veterinary surgeon Dr. Thiagarajan, as bureaucrats were faced with a growing number of "targets" and people they were required to reach out to for a variety of government schemes, they too started to appreciate the reach of announcements made on the VKC's PA system.[55] Another important role that bureaucrats saw for VKCs also drew on the KWs' insider and expert status: KWs became verifiers of social facts. As the government announced more loans or welfare schemes, the need to verify an applicant's identity became an important part of administering a scheme. KWs (and not just in Kilipet) were inevitably drawn into this process by both government agencies and residents. For instance, the BDO contacted the VKC for details such as the number of disabled people in the village, how many people drew pensions, or how many residents had thatched houses. But more critically, KWs were also asked to verify the reality of details submitted to them, such as the income situation of a person listed as being below poverty line (BPL), the authenticity of compensation claims for a house reported damaged in an accident, or whether a person listed as landless genuinely did not own land.

I asked Lakshmi and Tamilselvi how they went about participating in such a process and whether they faced pressure from village residents to answer in a particular way. Lakshmi explained her actions thus:

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> People sometimes come and tell us in advance that they have filled out the application and that I should answer a particular way. For example, people might live elsewhere to earn a living. We are after all here to do good for the poor. So we confirm whatever details people have provided. Sometimes people who are well off also do it. We say yes to whatever they have said, because we will be admonished otherwise.

Tamilselvi too explained that: "We are asked to point out houses. We give them [government officers] any information they ask for in private." Giving me another example, she continued:

> For example, they give money for a taali to those who can't buy one.[56] Why should we say this person is rich or that one is poor? It is from the government; everyone should experience that money. After all, only the person who suffers knows his sorrow.

She added though: "When coolie workers get a support sum, we make sure the dishonest ones don't get it; not people lazing indoors in the cool breeze of a fan because that would be wrong."

KWs were, thus, deeply implicated in the interactions between agents of the state and village residents. Moreover, as intermediaries in more ways than initially envisioned, these KWs were not merely channeling or transmitting relevant details from the state to village residents. Instead, they were involved in the very *creation* of the information that the center was supposed to transact in. This they did as required and depending on their own relationships with the residents concerned, with the bureaucrats, and, often, subject to their own ideas about who was deserving of government funds.

## VKCs AND POLITICS IN THE IMAGINATION OF A DIFFERENT FUTURE

I want to pause at this stage to take stock of the gap between how the Swaminathan Foundation had initially envisioned the IVRP and how it was working on the ground in Kilipet nine years after the project's deployment. The Swaminathan Foundation projected the IVRP as an "apolitical" project that kept its distance from politics. As explained in chapter 3, starting from the initial surveys on prevailing communication linkages—which neglected to examine or highlight linkages with either panchayat leaders or MLAs—the desire to stay away from politics was evident in the guidelines and reports of the IVRP. The most explicit and visible stance adopted by the project in

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this regard over the years was that VKCs were not to announce or display "political information."[57] This injunction was one that all KWs, including the Kilipet KWs, confirmed and took seriously.[58] What it meant was that KWs would never announce anything related to specific political parties because that would make the VKCs partisan and its working messy and, in consequence, less beneficial. I have attempted to show, however, that the VKC and its information provision objectives were inserted in such a complicated political terrain that they became deeply implicated in it in several ways, regardless of how much they sought to distance themselves from politics.

The working of the VKC in Kilipet looked significantly different than the information village envisioned in the foundation's initial documents, where "information production" and "information consumption" were distinct activities that could be impacted but were not fundamentally constituted by the diverse range of politics operating in the village. The VKC's work of information provision was carefully structured to not be involved with politics and potential conflicts in Kilipet. The VKC only announced or displayed details of government schemes or procedures. To the extent that announcements proved nonconflictual, they continued to be undertaken at the VKC. The VKC was less—or not at all—involved with activities that attempted to explicitly challenge rules or could potentially lead to conflict. In the context of pattas, for example, obtaining individual pattas for Nalla Nagar residents was a sensitive issue because it could essentially have shifted the terms of transaction between the MLA and residents. The VKC did not get involved in the matter of pattas until residents explicitly asked the foundation to help. Thus, the VKC's extent of involvement in Kilipet and its decisions regarding what to announce or display were themselves shaped by political considerations.

At the other end, far from being passive consumers of information, Kilipet residents gauged the value of announcements made by the VKC and then carefully chose how they wanted to make use of them. For instance, details of schemes were seen to be of value only in combination with other government records or documents such as pattas or 64-evidence (which the VKC could not provide). In addition, value was determined in the light of residents' past experiences. Their expectations of what they could receive from the government was based on their experience of how their connections or lack of them had worked in the past in the village. Any news about government schemes or opportunities was also interpreted through that lens. An oft-heard remark illustrated this: "What is the point of my applying for

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[scheme in question]? The president or MLA's men will get the loan/gas cylinder/cloth/rice anyway." Thus, far from being passive "consumers" of information, Kilipet residents carefully gauged how they could make use of what the VKC provided in light of their other resources and their past experiences of "seeing the state" in Kilipet (Corbridge et al. 2005).

The initial idea of the IVRP—of leaving politics to the local community, while nevertheless being a community-driven information provision project—was never a feasible option. One of the reasons for staying away from political activity was that it tended to be seen as a messy process and politics as either avoidable or best left to the community. But did the messiness of politics preclude beneficial consequences for different groups of village residents as they participated in political activity? And, in fact, were there problems that could only be dealt with through "messy politics"?

What the people of Kilipet showed me was that politics played a central role in their imagination of a better future, one where the government information provided at the VKC could actually be of more use in their dealings with the state. What they referred to as politics in this context was applying pressure or negotiating with local-level bureaucrats and politicians. They pointed to the protests against the VKC demolition as an example of a success but also to the need for something similar to resolve the patta or other issues that concerned the village as a whole. The VKC was even dragged into some of these processes (by submitting petitions for the resolution of patta issues or for saving the VKC from being demolished). Nor were residents only talking about organized political action.[59] They were as interested in undertaking an "invisible" mode of politics using their networks that I will discuss more in the concluding chapter. Indirectly, then, the VKC had already become a part of this imagined future for the village that was only achievable through political means.

## CONCLUSION

The Kilipet VKC's working on the ground differed significantly from the original information provision–information consumption paradigm of the IVRP: the prominence of arasiyal (politics) made all the difference between the two. The VKC ended up working in and through the complex political terrain of the village in its work of information provision, while residents too worked through this terrain to determine how best to make use of the VKC.

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Further, in many instances, residents recognized that using a range of political means was their best (only?) hope to improve the circumstances of their lives. The IVRP case, thus, showed us not just the centrality of politics in understanding information but also the importance of examining the many varieties of politics in operation.

Moreover, much as with the Kerala project, the role and range of politics only became visible when I stopped treating information as a free-floating substance with innate value and foregrounded the information order within which information was defined, produced, accessed, used, and evaluated. This meant including not just the documents and announcements related to 100-days work, pattas, 64-evidence, and loans in my analysis, but the political terrain in which these schemes were embedded in Kilipet. This brought into relief diverse actors—village residents, civil society, and various levels of state (at the panchayat, block, and state level, with their differing identity requirements and schemes), preferred material forms (written documentation, oral recordkeeping), and the range of negotiations involved in maintaining or changing the local information order.

The previous chapter examined a case whose popular interpretation has involved denying and, more or less, dismissing the intertwining of information and politics. In this chapter, I examined the case of an information-based development initiative that did not so much deny politics as it tried to keep it at bay. I used this case to argue that politics shapes the creation and use of information even where it is explicitly bracketed, as in the IVRP. In the next chapter, I examine what ensues when the role of politics is explicitly recognized and leveraged from the start by an information-based effort at social change. I focus on the Right to Information campaigns of the MKSS in Rajasthan in the 1980s and 1990s, which did precisely this. As I trace the history of this campaign, I find that even in this case where politics was intentionally visible, a range of other kinds of politics besides the formal and organized variety equally shaped the course of events. The final two chapters further examine the importance of paying attention to the diversity of politics in play in all three cases.

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6

# POLITICS MADE EXPLICIT: CREATING AN ACCOUNTABLE STATE WITH RIGHT TO INFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

## INTRODUCTION

> We have all been hearing for a long time that there is corruption, that stealing takes place [in welfare schemes]. However, unless you know the specifics, you won't know what it entails or how it is done. Till you see the documents, you don't know. It was when we got hold of the documents that we saw the difference between the story the documents told, and the story we were told [by welfare recipients] . . . Funds have to be accounted for and that requires an account be laid out in the documents. You have to book expenses at every level from the center or the state, to the block level, to the village, to the worksite . . . What are the stories being told at each level? Even if you do not have enough children to show at the anganwadi [village daycare], you still have to create false records that show children at the center [to receive funds from the state for running that center]. If these false records are taken to the public, what happens? For, there is what the documents say, and then there is what people's tongues say . . . The government trusts only the documents, not people's tongues . . . but people proved that false. Kaagaz mein ek jaadu hai [Documents can be magical].
>
> —Right To Information (RTI) activist and MKSS worker
> Shankar Singh, Rajasthan

This quote from long-term RTI activist and MKSS member Shankar Singh captures the fundamental premise of the campaigns that MKSS undertook in the 1990s: that being able to view documents from the state was a step toward holding it accountable. MKSS's work on RTI grew out of challenging the discrepancies between documented wages and the wages actually paid to workers in state-sponsored employment and relief schemes. Using the vehicle of "public hearings" (discussed in detail later in the chapter),

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MKSS's campaigns pitted the workers' oral version of what happened at a worksite against that of the written records that the workers were not even allowed to see because of the Official Secrets Act of 1923. Besides this open confrontation, MKSS also lobbied through its connections in the bureaucracy and leveraged the historical conjecture and the global focus on transparency toward making government records accessible. In conjunction with a number of campaigns across the country, MKSS's campaigns contributed to the passage of a national RTI Act in 2005, which provided citizens a way to access a range of government documents (later broadened to information) earlier barred to them.

In chapter 3, I laid out MKSS's discussion of information from a report its activists authored in 1991. Based on this discussion, I argued that MKSS's view of information saw existing structures as constitutive of information, rather than as external factors that impacted its use. Moreover, the discussion also qualified when information might be of value, rather than seeing it as having an intrinsic, autonomous value that persists in all conditions. The 1991 report also mentioned a *right* to information. But what shaped these insights in the first place? In this chapter, I examine key campaigns and events that led to this conception by MKSS and, over time, deepened into a demand for a right to information legislation.

In contrast to the previous two cases, here we have the case of an explicitly political campaign by a group that describes itself as part of "a non-party people's *political* process" (emphasis mine) (MKSS 2022). I examine what such a political view of information allowed the campaign to do that less political conceptions—such as the ones from the previous chapters—were unable to achieve. Moreover, I analyze the many kinds of visible and hidden politics that operated in parallel to get the RTI campaign under way.

I used multiple methods to gather and triangulate data about MKSS's campaigns (observation, interviews, and archival records). Spending time with MKSS members and participating in public hearings and other events organized by them in 2009 (mainly within Rajasthan) allowed me to build an understanding of how information was understood and deployed in their work. Interviews and less structured conversations also allowed me to dig deeper into the history of their work and the evolution of their own conceptions about information since the1980s. My observations and conversations also helped me snowball to individuals (village residents, activists, bureaucrats, and researchers) who were key to the campaigns of the 1980s and

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1990s. They also led me to archival records and media coverage from the period. Together, these methods helped me piece together a narrative of MKSS's campaigns leading up to the 1996 Right to Information rally.

This chapter focuses on three phases in MKSS's work: its early campaigns on minimum wages, its public hearings in the mid-nineties, and finally, a forty-day Right to Information rally in 1996. I trace how shifts in the larger political economy of welfare schemes (especially in the role that documents played in them) influenced these phases and helped consolidate support for an RTI law from diverse constituencies.[1] My focus throughout the chapter is on how the idea of information came to be used to attract support for the campaign and what manner of politics was employed in the process. But first, a brief overview of the role of documents in the landscape where MKSS worked.

## THE RULE (AND ROLE) OF DOCUMENTS

As outlined in chapter 3, MKSS's information focus in its 1991 report drew significantly on its early campaigns demanding minimum wages for workers at public worksites. Public works have historically been (and continue to be) important in the regions of Rajasthan where MKSS operated; these works were established to counter the harsh terrain and the limited range of livelihood options characteristic of the region. The tasks undertaken under various public works schemes in Rajasthan in recent times have typically included digging trenches, the manual laying of roads, building boundary walls for grazing lands, and repairing water bodies—tasks that create useful assets for a community and provide a livelihood opportunity for those willing to provide manual labor.[2] An important point to note here is that as "public" works, the material supply and labor costs of these are borne by the central or state government. The British were instrumental in formalizing the role of the state in the administration of such public works in the late 1800s, although the tradition of instituting such works predated them.

At the core of the administration of this system,[3] was the "magic" of documents that Shankar Singh was to describe a century later in my interview with him. Despite the profoundly different times and political regimes in which they existed, the public works documents of the 1890s and the 1980s were not fundamentally different in terms of their contents, their material form, or who could access them in Rajasthan. Nevertheless, the purposes for

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which these documents were leveraged underwent a shift in the context of MKSS's campaigns for minimum wages in the Devdungri region of Rajasthan in the late 1980s.

Migration was prevalent at the best of times in this region that did not receive adequate rain or have the quality or size of land holdings that could support a primarily agriculture-based livelihood. In the face of a severe drought in the late 1980s, migration from the region increased. For those who stayed back, public works such as the Rajasthan government's famine relief schemes were an important source of income. Under these schemes, residents of famine-affected regions could work at Famine Relief Works (FRW or just "Famine" to village residents) to earn a subsistence wage or rations.[4] But, between needing work and being allotted it, were involved several documents. Much like in British India, a strict chain of command controlled the creation, maintenance, and monitoring of these documents. The rules governing them also had their roots in the Famine Relief Code laid out by the British in the 1880s and these continued to instruct local administrations on how to anticipate, recognize, and provide relief during famines (Drèze 1988).[5]

The first step in starting up FRW was the declaration of famine. This was based on a land-use report prepared by the patwari (land records official) (Khera 2004).[6] This document was greatly open to interpretation and manipulation, with the result that the patwari was at least as important to people's employment prospects as the weather (Drèze 1995; Roy et al. 1991).[7] Once a famine was declared, worksites were declared open and any able-bodied adult resident was theoretically eligible to work at the site. A number of rules and actors dictated how work was to be conducted.[8] "Mates" supervised work at the sites and maintained records of worker attendance.[9] Engineers measured the tasks accomplished at worksites and recorded these details.[10] Workers were paid a wage calculated on the basis of their attendance and the tasks they had accomplished.

Work done at the site was recorded using various documents, including muster rolls, bills, vouchers, and measurement books (MBs). Muster rolls were issued by the department undertaking the work, and mates then recorded workers' attendance and calculated their wages on these rolls. On being paid, workers also signed off against their names on muster rolls. Bills and vouchers of materials were important because suppliers were supposed to be paid only after the verification of these documents. Finally, the MB contained plans of the asset to be created at a site, the materials required, the

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measurements of work done, and the dimensions of the work on completion; the muster roll, bills, and vouchers were thus connected to the MB that was maintained by the engineers. Muster rolls contained the stamp of the issuing department and were printed in a row and column format that was filled out by hand and signed; bills and vouchers had to be issued on the letterhead of the supplier; and MBs used technical language, units of measurement, and diagrams of assets under construction. The particular form and format of these documents, including the details I mentioned above, were significant in lending these documents legitimacy and rendering them official.

FRW rules and procedures, as well as the form and format of FRW documents, have historically reflected the preoccupation of the government apparatus (British and later, Indian) with worker attitudes and behavior.[11] Chief among these was a concern that the scheme would start serving lazy workers rather than the deserving poor.[12] Yet another was a conception of FRW as a form of government largesse, rather than as productive employment. The former concern was reflected in the layout of muster rolls, which recorded worker attendance as well as task accomplished and also required both figures to calculate a worker's wages. Absurdly, the maximum that workers could be paid for a day's work at an FRW site was the government-mandated minimum wage: therefore, workers were regularly paid *less* than the minimum wage if they did not complete a task.[13] The latter concern—about whether public works should be treated as dole or as employment[14]—meanwhile, allowed for workers to challenge in court the below minimum wage payments they were receiving for their work at public worksites.[15] Despite winning a court case on this in 1983, workers continued to be denied minimum wages on the grounds that their tasks were not completed.[16] This, in turn, continued to affect what was recorded on muster rolls and how wages were calculated.

At the time the activists who eventually formed MKSS started their work in the region in the late 1980s, FRW sites had settled into a rhythm that was actively maintained by workers and supervisors. From the worker's point of view, the important thing was to first get on a muster roll and then to be paid wages. Neither was a trivial task: getting on a muster roll depended on a worker's relationship with the head of the panchayat (sarpanch) and the mate, and the payment of wages typically happened months after the completion of the work.[17] Meanwhile, for the supervisors, the creation of documents and records was an important ongoing activity, with muster rolls, bills, vouchers, and MBs being the more important documents associated

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with FRW. It was these routine activities that were first interrupted by the minimum wage campaigns initiated by MKSS activists in 1987. By interrupting the creation and use of muster rolls, MKSS's minimum wage struggles challenged not only these specific documents but simultaneously the assumptions undergirding them about worker productivity and state dole.

## CAMPAIGNS FOR MINIMUM WAGES IN PUBLIC WORKS

In December 1987, the activists[18] in Devdungri started an experiment with the Rajasthan Irrigation Department to break the existing famine relief mentality and to ensure "complete work, complete payment."[19] Following discussions with workers and engineers, they explored the possibility of setting up a worksite where a task would be allotted, task completion supervised, measurement of task ensured, and worker wages paid in full.[20] Work commenced on a water body named Dadi Rapat with the cooperation of the Irrigation Department. A skilled mason from the department was assigned to allot tasks and supervise the workers for a fortnight. Two groups of workers were identified at the worksite—one that agreed to complete assigned tasks, and the other that wanted to work and be paid as usual.[21] The idea behind this trial was that members of the former group would be paid full wages if they completed their allotted tasks.[22] To ensure that the groups of workers could be distinguished, the activists asked the mate to mark the names of the workers of this group on the muster roll. The mate refused to show them the muster roll and added that only government officials were allowed to examine government documents.[23]

Workers, who had encountered this secrecy around muster rolls before, explained that muster rolls contained the names of more people than the ones reporting at the site. The mate often received a cut in the wages paid to these ghost workers or might have added names to oblige powerful people in the village. The prevalence of forged attendance also explained underpayment. Wage calculations were based on the entries in the muster roll and on completed work as measured on the ground. Since measurements were for the entire group, the size of the group was critical in determining how much an individual worker was paid. If the muster roll showed one hundred workers where only eighty had worked, the wage of each was lower than the minimum wage since the collective work they had to show was (at most) the work of eighty people and therefore less than what was expected of one hundred

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people.[24] At Dadi Rapat, the mate refused to show the muster roll till the end, and MKSS realized the importance of the "story told by documents" that began this chapter.[25]

In spite of assurances from the Irrigation Department, workers at Dadi Rapat were paid about half of what they were promised.[26] Moreover, the workers protested that their work had not even been measured. These protests continued over the next two years and got a shot in the arm when something similar happened in May 1990 with several works under the Famine Relief and Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY) Schemes.[27] Workers again informed supervisors that they would complete allotted tasks and would accept no less than the minimum wage for this work.[28] When workers were nevertheless paid less than this amount, about two hundred of them refused to take payment,[29] leading to another wave of protests and a hunger strike. The case finally went to court.[30] While the protesting workers were not immediately paid their wages, the campaign had succeeded in attracting attention to the state's attitude toward public works in general and minimum wages in particular.[31]

In December 1991, a second campaign for minimum wages started around JRY works in Barar panchayat a short distance away. Once again, a few workers submitted an application to the mate and sarpanch that they wished to complete their tasks and earn the full minimum wage.[32] They wanted to be either allotted a fixed task or to work for a fixed number of hours in a day; they also explained that the responsibility of allocating and measuring their work lay with the mate. Once again, workers were not allocated tasks but were nevertheless paid less than the minimum wage for the reason that they had not "completed their task." In January 1991, the panchayat also attempted to pass an (illegal) oral resolution, stating that all Famine Relief and JRY workers would be paid a flat rate that was half of the mandated minimum wage.[33] When workers were offered this payment, eleven workers refused to accept it. A fresh wave of rallies, sit-ins, and a "fast unto death" followed even as the workers continued to be under pressure to accept lower wages.

Against the backdrop of state elections, the state chief minister (CM) also visited the protests on May 6, 1991. But nervous about "setting a precedent" that decided wage levels in the future and worried that MKSS, rather than the government or the CM, would receive credit for the entire episode, the government attempted only to break up the protest.[34] Meanwhile, a central

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government team paid a visit in response to a complaint from MKSS to the Government of India Ministry of Rural Development.[35] The Rajasthan government came under pressure from the central government to pay minimum wages following the report submitted by this central team. This pressure came to a head when a national daily, *Navbharat Times*, broke the news that the central government had stopped an installment of Rs. 100 crores to the Rajasthan government because of the nonpayment of minimum wages.[36] By the end of the day on May 10, 1991, the protesters were paid their minimum wage.[37]

## DOCUMENTS IN THE MINIMUM WAGE CAMPAIGNS

By the end of these minimum wage campaigns, a few things had become clear to the MKSS activists. I argue that these went on to shape how they wrote about information in their 1991 report. For one, the centrality of documents in the administration of public schemes and works became obvious. Documents proved pivotal to both sets of minimum wage campaigns. On the one hand, documents such as muster rolls reflected the legal framework and administrative concerns around public works in their content and in the trajectories of their circulation. Thus, muster rolls recorded specific details about workers—their attendance, hours worked, and task completion—that could alleviate the administration's concerns regarding worker productivity. Bureaucrats could access these documents, and not workers, because of the prevalent structures of bureaucratic accountability. However, documents did not only reflect these structures and preconceptions, but I find that they also provided a core artifact around which the material politics of the minimum wage campaigns could be enacted.

The anthropologist Matthew Hull argues that documents are neither "simply instruments of bureaucratic organizations" (Hull 2012a, 251) nor "simply embodiments of social relations in the bureaucratic arena, idols of statist proceduralism whose qualities can be dissolved in a bath of context" (Hull 2008, 503–504). Instead, he suggests, documents are "constitutive of bureaucratic rules, ideologies, knowledge, practices, subjectivities, objects, outcomes, and even the organizations themselves" (Hull 2012a, 251) and can be "unexpected sources of action" that are used to remake "relations with the government" (Hull 2008, 504). This is what was attempted in MKSS's work with documents in the minimum wage campaigns and beyond.

If muster rolls offered an artifact around which to organize, the bureaucracy provided the social networks and attitudes that allowed (or disallowed)

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this artifact to be leveraged. Because of their history in/with the civil services, MKSS activists had strong links with the bureaucracy they used to bring visibility to their campaigns and ensure that they were listened to, at least some of the time. Getting a central government investigation team involved is a good example of a case where knowing a friendly bureaucrat helped. At the same time, from the perspective of other bureaucrats within whose jurisdiction these campaigns fell, these actions were often interpreted as bypassing levels of the government. Talking about MKSS's actions in reaching out directly to the central government with its complaints, the secretary (agriculture) in the government of Rajasthan at the time, M. L. Mehta, asked if that could ever be the right thing to do.[38]

Even more importantly, it became clear that administrative documents and bureaucratic actions were both embedded deeply in a specific social understanding of public works and workers that could sometimes even run contrary to law. Thus, despite a legal understanding of these works as offering minimum wage and productive employment, everyday work norms continued to be built on an understanding of public works as dole from the government and of workers at public worksites as lazy and unproductive.[39] Together with these longstanding assumptions, the need to keep to the rules and the fear of "setting a precedent" were important factors shaping the decisions of higher-level bureaucrats in both campaigns. For instance, when R. Singhvi, the collector from that time, narrated his experiences of Dadi Rapat and subsequent minimum wage episodes, he emphasized that as a member of the civil services he operated within a set of limitations. While he had tried to accommodate the demands of workers, he could not oblige them all the time. The former collector said that repeated measurements had indicated that workers had not accomplished their task. Since the minimum wage was connected to the task accomplished as per the state government's rules, the most he could have done was to interpret the measurements generously and pay as much as possible to the workers. But he could not, in any case, have paid minimum wages because that would have set a precedent.[40]

In the Barar episode as well, the SDM at the time B.N. Chaudhary mentioned that when the idea of remeasuring works came up as a solution at the meeting with the CM, he had himself suggested that measuring again would only show them again that tasks were incomplete.[41] The only way to defuse tension at that point was to pay the wages being asked for. However, once the police force was ordered in, there was nothing much he could

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do.[42] The SDM also said that he had always kept his records accessible, but there was simply no provision for nonbureaucrats to make copies of muster rolls. The former secretary (agriculture) M. L. Mehta, said that while it was very easy to blame the government for everything, it was important to look into the feasibility of implementation of some of the ideas related to the payment of minimum wages. For example, was it feasible to expect that the work of individual workers could be distinguished and measured every day? Further, did workers need to be explicitly told what their task was in a region that had a long history of public works: did they not know it already? Addressing the quality of supervision, Mehta remarked that people worked when they wanted to and that "you could not really make someone work!"[43] According to him, the workers would all be more productive if they were building something for themselves than at public worksites.

Thus, in both wage campaigns, the desire among bureaucrats not to break rules, to not "set a precedent," and assuming the low productivity of workers at public worksites as the default strongly influenced how seriously the contents of muster rolls and other documents were maintained or examined as evidence in the course of the protests. To that extent, what was important for MKSS was not just to make these documents accessible but to make visible the beliefs undergirding these documents. The minimum wage protests showed how documents and procedures around public works rested on a number of assumptions about who was accountable to whom, about worker productivity, and about the very the nature of state involvement (as benefactor or employer? for instance). Experiences from these campaigns went on to strongly influence MKSS's conception of information as presented in its 1991 report detailed in chapter 3. Thus, instead of focusing only on information about programs, the report emphasizes presenting information that allows "the oppressed to see their oppression in stark terms," that is, see the underlying rationale and structures that reproduce their oppression/poverty. MKSS's later campaigns continued using documents to point to larger structural issues.

## CONTESTING RECORDS THROUGH PUBLIC HEARINGS

MKSS had firmly established public works as its primary area of focus by the early 1990s.[44] However, following India's economic liberalization and its attempts to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) in this period, a drastic reduction of government resources toward public schemes, especially

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rural development programs, appeared imminent.[45] MKSS gauged that the pressure on the government was too great at this time for it to listen to demands for additional resources for rural development programs.[46] It decided, instead, to make the most of available resources by focusing on accountability. This focus also worked well with the growing global and Indian emphasis on participation and decentralization. Even as economic liberalization was dismantling the welfare state and taking decision-making to global fora like the World Bank or the WTO that were even further removed from the citizens of rural Rajasthan, the 73rd constitutional amendment of 1993 was claiming to involve Indian citizens in processes of decision-making through the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI).[47] But where, MKSS started asking, was the space for people to express their opinion in practice?[48] The jan sunwai (public hearing) emerged as one answer.

By 1994, MKSS was searching for an alternative forum for the "collective articulation of people's voices" and for "issues that had an urgent appeal to sensibilities across social categories" (Roy et al. 1995, 13–97). By this time, MKSS had broadened its view of government accountability, seeing "bureaucratic mismanagement, misappropriation, and selective sharing of information" along with "the ignorance of actual expenditures and incomprehension of development plans" as fundamental concerns that led to drainage of funds. For MKSS, public hearings offered a way to counter these problems by acting as "a mode to interface the government with the people's problems so that democratic processes can be understood and used better by the people."[49] While MKSS did not invent the idea of public hearings, the specific form of public hearings it adopted had unique elements. Framed as "hearings" rather than as protests, these hearings were to allow people to articulate their version of what happened and compare their narratives against those presented by government records. A panel of eminent individuals arrived at a verdict based on these testimonies. In fact, the earliest hearings were even called Jan Adalat (or people's court) by the press.[50]

The first public hearing was held in panchayat Kot Kirana in Rajasthan's Pali district in December 1994. It came about when the local block development officer (BDO) Nirmal Wadhwani offered to help MKSS with cases of nonpayment of wages in the panchayat.[51] Taking up the BDO's offer, Shankar Singh met him in August 1994 with the details of a complaint MKSS had received. The BDO agreed to conduct an investigation and even accompanied Singh to villages.[52] He read out records related to a public works

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scheme to gauge reactions. As he read, people spoke up to disagree with the details he read out.[53] In Singh's telling, the BDO grew flustered, moving from one set of records to another as the number of voices grew. He finally stopped reading out records, promising to return later to address people's questions.

On the way back to the BDO's office, Singh and the BDO also visited a supplier of materials to understand how bills and vouchers were created in practice. Consulting his diary, the supplier told them that while he had indeed supplied some construction material to the panchayat, it did not include doors and windows. When the BDO asked the supplier to explain how bills for doors and windows came to be issued on the supplier's letterhead if he had not supplied these materials, the supplier responded: "The sarpanch keeps the bill book and issues whatever bills he wants from it." Leveraging this instance, Singh suggested to the BDO that if he wanted to investigate what was going on in Kot Kirana, he should provide MKSS photocopies of records for the panchayat, so that MKSS members could investigate the records in more detail. The BDO initially agreed, but when Singh visited his office, he confessed facing resistance from his office staff regarding his decision to make records available for photocopying. The BDO then suggested that Singh copy out the records by hand, sitting in the BDO's room. That is what Singh eventually did.

MKSS toured the panchayat with these handwritten records, asking people to verify details. The team discovered massive discrepancies between the records and people's narratives. For example, muster rolls contained names of people who lived and worked in other Indian states. Buildings that were visibly incomplete (or just did not exist) showed up on records as having been completed. The BDO acted on MKSS's complaint and filed First Information Reports (FIRs) against the junior engineer and the gram sewak (village secretary) in September 1994. Despite the complaint and multiple letters to various people in the district administration, no action was taken against the engineer or the gram sewak. As tempers rose against this lack of action, a local caste panchayat was organized around the issue, possibly at the request of the engineer and the gram sewak themselves. It fined the engineer and the gram sewak a paltry Rs. 1,100 when they confessed to misappropriating government funds. With this, action was said to have been taken.

It was at this juncture that MKSS thought of doing a public hearing. Since the complaints and "action" by the administration appeared to be happening behind closed doors and only on paper, MKSS thought it would help to

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have the people mentioned in the records talk about them: a hearing among people, a jan (of the people or public) sunwai (hearing). Moreover, as the issue seemed to be fading from discussions within the administration, a public hearing would ensure that the misappropriations remained in the limelight. The Kot Kirana public hearing was scheduled for December 2, 1994. The environment before and during the hearing was tense, and MKSS members, supporters, and witnesses were threatened and offered bribes to withdraw from it. MKSS used video cameras to record testimonies of village residents in the days before the hearing in case residents were not allowed to testify

Figure 6.1
Public hearing in Chileshwar, Rajasthan, during the author's visit in March 2009. Photograph by the author.

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at the hearing. Members distributed pamphlets to publicize the hearing.[54] They found that village residents were being cautioned against attending the hearing on the grounds that police personnel would be present at the hearing and that there was sure to be trouble. On the day of the hearing, curiosity brought residents to the site, but the fear of the police kept them a safe distance from it. However, when residents realized that there was no police presence after all, they started to speak out.

The public hearing panel was chaired by prominent outsiders, but the government officials who had been invited to the hearing did not attend. The public hearing itself was video recorded to minimize chances of being misrepresented, especially in view of the absence of government officials at the hearing. By the end of the hearing, many cases of discrepancies in development spending had been discussed. Bills related to the purchase of stones for construction were exposed as false when people testified that the stones had come from a pre-existing structure. People pointed to a windowless and doorless building when bills for the purchase of doors and windows for that building were read out. There were multiple instances where the names of workers who resided in another state or held a salaried government job appeared on muster rolls.[55] An old man expressed support for the forum offered by the hearing and asked that the BPL list of the village similarly be read out in public.

In Singh's words, with the first public hearing,

> A path opened for us from there . . . Even if someone came to us with a small complaint, we would start to investigate the larger matter . . . If someone said they had not received their rations, we would not talk about only that; we would ask for copies of the complete ration register so that we could get more people involved. We kept one person's papers at the center, but asked for everything.

Following the Kot Kirana hearing, the junior engineer and gram sewak were suspended. An individual slated to stand for the upcoming panchayat elections withdrew from the polls following accusations of corruption at the hearing.[56] The public hearing series continued with more scheduled in the next month. The second hearing was held in Bhim a few days later, on December 7, 1994. More discrepancies were discovered, especially a "flagrant violation of government norms regarding development schemes."[57] In the Vijayapura hearing held on December 17, 1994, discrepancies related to land allotment were brought up, as was the use of low-quality material in

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the construction of a school room.[58] The local and Hindi language press reported all three hearings in great detail. This was different than earlier MKSS campaigns that were covered less extensively, both in terms of the number of newspaper articles about them and the regions covered by these newspapers.[59]

Presumably, the protests initiated by government officials against a fourth public hearing were at least partially fueled by this press coverage.[60] A fourth hearing had been scheduled for Jawaja in the neighboring Ajmer district in early January 1995. Despite orders from the collector,[61] gram sewaks of the Jawaja Panchayat Samiti made a statement that they would not provide records to citizens but only to senior bureaucrats in the government. Even though the Jawaja public hearing was targeted at panchayats within a single Panchayat Samiti, it worried a state-level body of gram sewaks (the "Gram Sewak Sangh") enough to file a complaint with the state development commissioner for having been asked to make records available at all.[62] MKSS decided to go ahead with the public hearing on January 7, 1995, without official records, relying only on statements from village residents. People testified: they had had to pay a bribe to be allocated money under a scheme to build low-cost housing; a community rest house built with government funds had been left half-constructed; and a forty-year-old anicut had been presented as altogether new even though it had only been touched up with a layer of cement. The Jawaja hearing and the resistance to it both received extensive press coverage.[63]

The Jawaja hearing was important because it was around this hearing that "the issue of access to development information crystallized" for MKSS (Roy et al. 1995, 14–109).[64] It was also after this hearing that the campaign could be scaled up from the panchayat to the state level.

> More than the people's action, therefore, in holding local Jan Sunwais in central Rajasthan, it was the reaction of Panchayat Secretaries that transformed the demand for transparency of development expenditure at the local level into a statewide issue of people's Right to Information. (Mishra 2003, 13)

Prior to the Jawaja hearing, MKSS had written a letter to chief secretary (CS) M. L. Mehta describing public hearings as a mode that "shifted the attention from a conventional sequence of suspension, transfer, etc. to the larger issues of one's future and the country's commitment to remove poverty."[65] MKSS sent out a similar letter following the Jawaja hearing, but this time threatened to organize a statewide campaign if the state succumbed to pressure from gram sewaks or accepted demands that gram sewaks were not

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required to show records of development works to village residents (Mishra 2003, 14).

Meanwhile, in the lead-up to the state-level elections, the Rajasthan CM made an announcement in a public meeting and in the State Assembly regarding access to panchayat records. The CM's announcement was picked up and published by *Dainik Navjyothi*, a local newspaper, on April 6, 1995.[66] The announcement read:

> We have been unable to provide one right to the people of Rajasthan and that right is the Right to Information. This is not available anywhere in India but I have been thinking about it . . . During the elections between 1990 and 1994/95 . . . the Village Level Worker ate [embezzled funds], the patwari ate, the officer ate, the sarpanch ate, panchayat members ate.[67] I announce in this assembly today that records on development works conducted between 1990–1995 in panchayats or rural regions will be available on payment of photocopying charges if a sarpanch or a panchayat wants them. And if misdoings are detected, it will be investigated by the state government or any other agency we create.[68]

## DOCUMENTS AND POLITICS AT THE PUBLIC HEARINGS

Once again, both documents and social networks shaped how public hearings worked. The material form and format of muster rolls, bills, vouchers, and measurement books (MBs) shaped who could manipulate, access, or even make sense of these documents. It was the state that created or verified muster rolls, bills/vouchers, and MBs, and it was also the state that had the most access to these documents once they were created. So important was it to maintain this privilege, in fact, that gram sewaks threatened to go on strike unless they were protected from having to show these documents to the workers (whom the documents were about) or to anyone other than their higher-ups within the bureaucracy to whom they saw themselves as accountable.

Moreover, even the availability of documents was no guarantee that they would be fully comprehensible. The written form, as well as the bureaucratic and technical language used by muster rolls, bills/vouchers, and MBs obscured them to those who could not read, as well as to those who were not familiar with the administrative or technical categories and units used in the documents. For example, the language in which the progress of the construction of a road or a water body was recorded by an engineer affected what workers could make of MBs even when copies were made available. The language used in these documents was likely to be familiar only to the

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bureaucrats who used it every day. Shankar Singh remarked that his own father being a patwari had enabled him to understand the records that he was copying down for the Kot Kirana public hearing.[69]

Ironically, the idea of public hearings drew on the legitimacy accorded to written documents in a bureaucracy, especially the need for a paper trail and records to support every expenditure and transaction. Without these, a comparison of the official and unofficial narratives would not have been possible. However, since a paper trail was essential to the operation of public works schemes, public hearings did become possible. Moreover, the material form and format of documents continued to play a role in these hearings. In preparing for public hearings, MKSS reorganized documents for clarity. For example, muster rolls for a worksite listed the attendance and wage details of multiple workers for a fortnight. MKSS compiled and reorganized muster rolls for different fortnights to list the total number of days worked and wages paid per worker. Further, it compiled and filed the muster rolls, bills/vouchers, MBs, and other documents related to a single worksite and scheme together. The purpose behind this reorganization and collation was to make categories more comprehensible. Documents were also read out loud to groups of residents who could then argue over them and make sense of them collectively. Oral testimonies at the public hearings also allowed more people to hear the official record than had been possible with written documents that were difficult to access. Further, people could in parallel hear an alternative version of what had happened as presented by other village residents. Thus, the form and format of content, including whether it was written or orally communicated, how it was laid out and formatted, and the language it used, were at least as significant as the content of records. In the course of the public hearings, material form was thus leveraged to make documents comprehensible to a wider range of the population.

The idea behind the public hearings had been to offer a forum where village residents could speak to the state, what Pande terms an "alternative public sphere" (Pande 2014). The hearings also aimed to raise broad issues that could appeal across gender and class lines. Between December 1994 and April 1995, MKSS went some distance toward achieving both these objectives with the series of public hearings that I described. Some levels of the state had paid heed to the public hearing reports, and hearings had drawn working class, middle class, male, and female participation.[70] MKSS identified some of its tactics as important to achieving these goals (Roy et al. 1995, 13–101).

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Inviting eminent outsiders to the hearings established the legitimacy of the hearings, as did involving the press. Video recordings, though expensive, ensured that testimonies were on tape and that hearings could not be misrepresented by government workers. Shankar Singh emphasized the need for participants from within the village in organizing the hearings:

> There are already factions within a village. Wherever there have been cases of misappropriation, there is a village resident involved in it somewhere. It is not that government officials have directly, without approaching village residents [indulged in misappropriation by themselves] . . . This person will manage there, he has his politics, he will play [by the rules of those politics]. If you go to a place you don't know at all, you won't have an idea what politics he is playing . . . Therefore, village residents have to be connected in some way [with our work].[71]

Taking a single complaint and using that to access a larger body of records proved a successful way to involve more people in the hearing. Finally, involving the press in the public hearings had been useful, both because of the coverage it provided for the public hearings and because it highlighted the CM's announcement about making copies of government records available.

## FROM ACCESSING DOCUMENTS TO A RIGHT TO INFORMATION (1996)

With the CM's announcement regarding a right to examine government records, MKSS felt the time was ripe to bring together more people and regions to discuss this right. The first statewide Right to Information Summit was held in the town of Beawar, about 60 km from Devdungri, in September 1995.[72] The summit was attended by 2,000 people, including village residents, representatives from NGOs, former civil servants, trade unions, and panchayat members (Mishra 2003, 22; Roy et al. 1995, 15–127).[73] Participants also included journalists, lawyers, activists, and civil servants. Participants' domains of work were equally diverse, including health, environment, development-induced displacement, labor, and economic liberalization. All these participants spoke of their experiences and difficulties in obtaining records from the state, and why these records were important to their work.[74] The concrete experiences discussed at the meeting were in terms of *records*, but the resolution that was passed used the term *information* in proposing that a right to information was a fundamental right.[75] *Nirantar*, a Beawar-based, independently owned Hindi daily, covered the meeting and published an article about it on its front page.[76]

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By early 1996, numerous parallel discussions took place at the regional, state, and national levels about a right to obtain records from the government.[77] This was a right that was increasingly being framed as the "right to information," even though the term was not standardized at the time. Despite these discussions, even panchayat records were not accessible in Rajasthan by April 1996, a full year after the CM's oral promise that they would be. Calling it the next phase of "the struggle against corruption in public works," MKSS announced an indefinite dharna (sit-in) in Beawar in April 1996.[78] A background note to the dharna demanded that

(a) Orders be issued that copies of all documents concerning development expenditure, including bills, vouchers, and muster rolls are freely and promptly made available to any citizen on demand and that officials willfully withholding or delaying the access to such information are penalized.
(b) Orders of government further prescribe that in the event of prima facie evidence of corruption being provided by citizens, the government is bound to register and investigate criminal cases within a prescribed time limit. (MKSS 1996)[79]

On April 6, 1996, the day the dharna was to start, the government issued an order granting citizens the right to inspect all documents but stopped short of a right to allow photocopying of these documents. Without the right to photocopy, MKSS saw the order as toothless.[80] The dharna started as planned and later came to be seen as a watershed event for the RTI movement (Kidambi 2008, 13–14; Mishra 2003, 22–25).

*Nirantar* followed the dharna closely through the forty days it lasted, and I trace the evolution of the dharna by following this coverage.[81] *Nirantar* articles offered a detailed day-to-day picture of how the dharna grew to involve diverse groups of people and their equally wide-ranging concerns. Intertwined with that process was the one by which the terminology of demands adopted by the dharna became standardized, especially how "right to information" became the preferred term to refer to the right to access government records and documents. In the following pages, I intersperse existing accounts of the dharna with its coverage in *Nirantar* to explore both these processes.

The dharna took place at the centrally located Chang gate in Beawar, in a public square surrounded by shops that saw footfall through the day. Campaigners used folk songs, dance, theater, and speeches to discuss the right to access government records and to demand such a right from the government

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at the dharna. They also led processions and rallies through town to government offices where they presented a written copy of their demands. Beawar residents were initially skeptical and puzzled about the presence of the obviously rural ghagra paltan (skirt platoon) in the more urban Beawar and by its seemingly esoteric demand for "information" rather than for food, clothes, or shelter (Kidambi 2008; Singh 2007). But they quickly came around in support once they found that their own problems with the government resonated with those of the campaigners. MKSS members reminisced that unlike other dharnas, there were no bored people at this one: no one gossiped or played cards! There was so much going on and so much involvement from the audience that there was no question of monotony setting in.

Besides the daily cultural performances at the dharna site, special events also kept up the momentum of the dharna. On May Day, Beawar residents and visitors flocked to MKSS's annual workers' fair that sold household items, food, and drink at low prices. A prabhat pheri (morning procession) was organized where dharna participants walked across Beawar early in the morning, presenting their demands as songs.[82] Since such processions were usually religious in nature, this attracted a lot of attention for its unique songs that were unconnected to religion. Besides attending the dharna and participating in these activities (the audience for the dharna varied between 500 and 700 through the day), Beawar residents also contributed wheat, vegetables, firewood, water, cleaning services, or money to the dharna.[83]

As support for the dharna grew, so did the disquiet it caused in the government and among political parties, especially since the dharna came in the middle of the campaigning season for the national elections. The dharna proved to be especially embarrassing for the ruling party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), since it exposed the gap between their CM's speech and his actions. Protesters were given repeated verbal assurances that the government was committed to giving people the right to peruse government records, as well as to make notes about these records, on the payment of a fee. But these assurances were not issued in official written form; further, the entitlement seemed vaguely worded and incomplete to the protestors who wanted details such as the fees for records or what would happen if an officer refused to show someone the records.[84] The question of allowing photocopies had also become central to the debate.[85] A few days into the dharna, the CM met dharna representatives while he was touring the region for the upcoming national-level elections at the end of April and told them that detailed orders would be issued on

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the right to photocopy documents at a prescribed fee—but only after the elections.[86] This offer did not satisfy the participants of the dharna, and the dharna continued.[87]

MKSS invited a range of speakers to the dharna, including national-level journalists and activists as well as passersby whose comments were solicited. Among the first speakers at the dharna were Kuldip Nayar and Nikhil Chakravarty, two well-known journalists, and Swami Agnivesh, a prominent activist.[88] Nikhil Chakravarty's widely quoted words at the dharna are worth repeating to emphasize the perceived significance and lineage of the dharna:

> The struggle for independence was built around exposing the looting of the country by foreign rulers. Your struggle is in essence the same: exposing the looting of the country by our own rulers. This was a right that should have come with independence. It is not going to be easy to win this entitlement, but you must not give up. This is like a second battle for independence. (Speech quoted in Dey and Roy 2009)

Other speakers at the dharna also spoke of its national significance in bringing together people across classes and regions. Tripurari Sharma, a Delhi-based playwright, emphasized that the strength of the dharna lay in the fact that more people were joining it by the day.[89] Kesrimal, a former legislator, saw the campaign as a way to ensure justice and equality in the country.[90]

When they spoke, people from different professions highlighted the significance of information to their domains of work. Prabash Joshi, a Delhi-based journalist, thanked MKSS for starting a campaign that journalists across the country ought to have initiated. Harsh Mander, a civil servant who would later play an important role in drafting the RTI Act, clarified that the dharna was against corruption, not the government.[91] Medha Patkar, a prominent social activist who worked on issues of development-induced displacement, spoke of the dharna's demand in the context of the government's transactions with multinational corporations and international development agencies.[92] Kuldip Nayar, a Delhi-based journalist, wrote of the dharna's demands and how issues ranging from the Bhopal gas leak to electoral spending were related to the lack of accountability.[93] Why was information on transactions between the government and private players not made public? asked other speakers.[94] Another speaker encouraged people to talk about the RTI more in their own communities and residential localities.[95]

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Participants at the dharna too were attracted to it for a variety of reasons. A local textile workers' union expressed support declaring that a government whose promises and actions were so different had no right to ask for people's votes.[96] The right to information was only one on the CM's list of unmet promises, with other promises ranging from a water dispute in the region to changing administrative boundaries. In this case, the dharna had simply provided the union members a platform to share their frustration and thoughts regarding broken promises more broadly. Even as diverse groups came up to join the dharna, dharna organizers also actively reached out to more people. For example, young adults from thirty-five villages bicycled 100 km to reach Beawar, discussing the RTI at villages en route.[97] Meanwhile, a process of administrative enquiry into corruption in development works that MKSS had helped initiate in a nearby panchayat found government officers guilty of corruption on preliminary inspection.[98] The decision boosted MKSS's confidence that its demands were timely, legitimate, and would resonate with residents of the region.

Alongside the attempt to reach out to more people and establish the legitimacy of its demands, MKSS continued to strategize about escalating the idea of an RTI beyond Beawar. Participants agreed that demand for an RTI and the anti-corruption message of the dharna would be taken very seriously by voters at the upcoming national elections given the context of recent scams in India.[99] Nor were voters likely to forget the reactions of the government and different political parties to the dharna. By this time, politicians had also realized the stakes and started to speak at the dharna. The head of the local Congress committee expressed his support for the dharna.[100] Many other elected leaders and regional politicians affiliated with different political parties had expressed written support for the demands put forth at the dharna.[101] BJP members, however, had a hard time deciding what their public face would be, and BJP MLAs never visited the dharna.[102] The fact that the ruling party MLA had not made a single appearance at the dharna, nor evinced support or any reaction to the demands, continued to rankle among dharna participants.[103] Meetings and correspondence between dharna participants and the CM continued in May after the national elections.[104] But a written order from the administration proved elusive. Dharna organizers started a parallel dharna in the state capital, Jaipur, on May 6, when their demands did not elicit a response.[105]

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As the two dharnas continued and there seemed to be little action by the government, local participants in Beawar even suggested holding a one-day shutdown in the city.[106] *Nirantar* published a piece in which it questioned the government's intentions.[107] Finally, on May 15, 1996, the government issued a statement to the press that it would implement the CM's commitment on a right to information.[108] It announced the constitution of a committee that would investigate the logistics of implementation, especially on how to make photocopies and certified copies of government records available to citizens on demand. The committee was to submit its recommendations in two months. MKSS saw the government's announcement as a victory. It added that while it was accepting the government's announcement in good faith for the moment, protests would be resumed if more comprehensive orders were not issued within the two-month timeframe.

Following the CM's statement, MKSS concluded the Beawar dharna, which had lasted forty days. Rather than focusing on the government's final statement, MKSS described the long process of negotiation with the government in a statement to the press upon the conclusion of the dharna. According to the statement, two factors had been responsible for delaying written orders: the internal struggle between bureaucrats and politicians and a preoccupation with the modalities of implementing the order.[109] Some of the negotiation was also over who would get credit for the idea of an RTI. MKSS criticized the government's claim that MKSS was trying to garner credit for an idea that had, in fact, originated from the government itself.[110] My interview with M.L. Mehta, who was the CS during the campaign, also reflected a similar struggle for credit. He insisted that while MKSS deserved credit for its "hard work and superb organizing," its work could not have happened in a less supportive environment than the one that the Rajasthan government had offered at the time.[111] He argued that the Rajasthan government had already been thinking about a right to information when the dharna took place. Irrespective of the origin of the idea, the struggle goes to show how important it had become for the government to be seen as the source of an entitlement.

It would take many more months for the findings of the committee to be made public and for a written order to be crafted based on the report.[112] It was also four more years before a Rajasthan RTI came into being and nine before the national equivalent did. Nevertheless, the Beawar dharna was a

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milestone in the RTI campaign in that it was the first time that the idea and terminology of a "Right to Information" firmed up and received recognition from an economically, socially, and geographically diverse group of people.[113] Most of all, this was the first time the idea was posed to the state and a written response received. How did the Beawar dharna manage to do all this, and why did it matter? I examine these questions next.

## INFORMATION AND POLITICS IN THE RTI PROTESTS

The timing of the Beawar dharna was important in shaping its outcome. The upcoming elections put the BJP in a difficult position. On the one hand, the BJP could take credit for having been the first political party to make an announcement granting rights to see panchayat records. However, the BJP faced a lot of resistance internally and from bureaucrats, which made it difficult for the CM to bring out an official order confirming the announcement. This discrepancy between promise and actions left the BJP in an embarrassing position. Meanwhile, other political parties were forced to express their support after a few days of waiting and watching. More generally, the Beawar dharna exposed the fractures and collusions between politicians and bureaucrats. Even as the CM appeared willing to make panchayat records available, bureaucrats seemed unwilling. Some of this was related to the modalities of implementing such an order across the state for which lower-level bureaucrats would be held responsible. But the resistance seemed to have as much to do with an unwillingness to make the records available at all.

The Beawar dharna was able to involve a range of people, including people with different occupations, economic situations, and areas of concern. The use of theater, music, and speeches helped in this process. MKSS used its connections with eminent people (bureaucrats, journalists, and academics) to make this happen (Pande 2014). But the use of the term information that people could not refuse alignment with, was equally significant. Specific examples of the need for information from people working in a variety of domains helped to simultaneously anchor and broaden the scope of the term. If Patkar brought in environmental concerns, Joshi saw RTI as important for the press; Mander talked about its relevance to combat corruption; and mill workers saw it as a way to match actions to the claims made on an election manifesto. MKSS itself moved from its focus on a specific document like the muster roll to talking about information.

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## THE POLITICAL LIFE OF INFORMATION IN MKSS'S WORK

What struck me in multiple interviews and conversations with MKSS members was that they would use the words "kaagaz" (papers) or "dastaavez" (documents) when talking about government records up until the minimum wage campaign. While referring to incidents after that campaign, they started referring to "soochana" (information). An oft-repeated event in the narrative of the Right to Information campaign suggested that the basic assumptions of the campaign took birth in Devdungri.[114] However, this narrative still did not explain the use of the specific term *information* in these campaigns. Most members had no precise recollection of when or why exactly the term came into use.[115] They suggested that it came into use so that a wider range of records and more ground could be covered in their demands.[116] Some suggested that it might have entered through the vocabulary of the middle-class activists who were involved. M. L. Mehta, the CS at the time, suggested that the CM of Rajasthan was the first to put the idea in terms of information, even if elements of the idea already existed by the time the CM made his announcement.[117] However, I showed earlier that the IDSJ report from 1991 (that is, prior to the CM's announcement at the assembly) had already mentioned the idea of a right to information in those terms.

While tracing the origin of a term precisely is almost impossible, what does seem clear is that the move from referencing a specific artifact like a muster roll to records to using a broader and more flexible term such as information worked in the interest of expanding the support base for the campaign. As I pointed out earlier, the individuals and groups participating in the dharna were asking for different things when they demanded a "right to information." Yet, traders, workers, activists, and bureaucrats, who might otherwise have disagreed on many issues and on strategy, were able to agree on this one demand. The government was also unable to refuse the demand because of the progressive connotation of terms such as transparency and openness that were associated with the terms "information" and "right to information." The global emphasis on RTI laws at this time can be gauged by the fact that where fourteen countries had RTI laws by 1990, fifty-four more countries had been added to that list by 2005 (when the Indian law was finally passed), eighteen of them in the 1990s alone.[118]

Singh (2011) and Sharma (2016) point to several more reasons why the Indian RTI movement worked the way it did and at the time it did. While

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both Singh and Sharma see a role for the grassroots action of groups such as MKSS, they emphasize other domestic and international factors that helped the movement. One that I already mentioned was the growing global focus on transparency and good governance that had also become enforceable through loan conditionalities and other mechanisms. Sharma (2014) also argues that post-liberalization India with lucrative private-sector jobs saw bureaucrats who were much less invested in the public sector for their own futures or those of their offspring. He argues that bureaucrats (especially at the higher levels) themselves became much more inclined to free up access to government records in this period, which contributed to the acceptance and passage of RTI at this time. Finally, he sees the social position of MKSS activists as critical to the way the RTI movement and legislation panned out. All of these factors form the broader political landscape within which information was leveraged to achieve a particular outcome in this case. But how did they shape the range of politics used to achieve this end? The concluding chapters will get at that question in more detail.

## CONCLUSION

In contrast to the previous two cases, this chapter examined an explicitly political campaign that demanded information from the state. During a campaign demanding minimum wages for workers in state-sponsored employment and relief schemes, MKSS challenged the discrepancies between documented wages and the wages actually paid to workers participating in these schemes in the state of Rajasthan. MKSS also highlighted the obstructions that workers faced in accessing government documents. Its endeavor grew over the next few years to become a statewide movement demanding a legal right for citizens to examine government documents. In conjunction with similar campaigns across the country, the MKSS's campaigns contributed to the national RTI Act in 2005, which provided citizens a way to access government records. In the years since, social audits and visibility into government records have also been designed into schemes such as NREGA (Hanbal et al. 2020; Veeraraghavan 2021).

Here, as in previous cases, unpacking information and examining the information order within which the RTI campaigns took root allowed me to understand why and in what material forms diverse actors including workers, activists, and agents of the state (at the central and Rajasthan state

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levels) leveraged information. In sharp contrast to the earlier cases, MKSS's campaigns focused less on documents or information as the objective truth that would empower workers. A key aspect of the public hearings that was at the heart of several of these campaigns, for instance, was to highlight *discrepancies* between the workers' oral version of what happened at a worksite and the state's account of that activity in its written records that was unavailable for workers to peruse. Thus, rather than as the truth, these campaigns treated documents and records as the artifacts around which questions of government accountability could be raised. In the process, they also offered opportunities to uncover and challenge the assumptions backing government schemes and actions.

Another aspect of information that this case highlighted more starkly than the previous two was how the ambiguity of the term information could prove useful. The chapter laid out how MKSS made use of all that the term could be used to refer to, to gain support from a variety of constituencies that did not usually make common cause, including village residents, politicians, bureaucrats, activists working on other concerns, journalists, and the urban middle classes. Finally, this case offered an opportunity to understand how politics operated in parallel in more and less visible ways even in this case of an explicitly political campaign. In the concluding chapters, I examine the differing nature of politics, politicization, and depoliticization in the three cases I have analyzed, the first of which denied politics; the second, which bracketed it; and this, the third, which embraced it.

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# UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION WITH INFORMATION ORDERS

## INTRODUCTION

In proposing the construct of an information order, historian Christopher Bayly (2000) hoped to correct what he saw as a serious lacuna in analyses of historical events and social change: that they did not take information seriously. With information as its entry point, this book and the cases it examines are unlikely to face that charge. In fact, between them, the case chapters have implicitly attempted to describe "the variety of localized engagements between knowledge and power" that Bayly argues are valuable (143). In this chapter, I will undertake a comparison between the cases, drawing on the previous four chapters to understand the reasons for and implications of this variety, asking of each case:

- what was counted as information and why
- how that information was produced and the challenges entailed in producing it
- who was able to leverage it and in what ways.

Throughout, I draw and build on Bayly's construct of an information order to understand how information and social orders shape each other. For my purposes, the information order lens allows for a relational understanding of information, one where information is the point of focus (thus addressing Bayly's contention that information typically gets subsumed in analyses of power), but at the same time, every aspect of its production and use is understood to be socially defined. Moreover, while foregrounding information can risk obscuring politics—a primary concern and critique in development circles—the construct of an information order forces us to analyze information in relation to a context and, thus, brings the politics back in. I do this by focusing especially on the connections and interactions between the information initiative I study, its target populations, and the

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state and civil society in each case. I also emphasize different moments in the life of information, its conceptualization, production, and use. Finally, the information order framework makes visible the diverse *kinds* of politics that were involved in each case. The next and final chapter will further build on this understanding of politics, delving further into the theoretical and empirical implications of this visibility for research and practice.

In keeping with the goals of this chapter, I begin with a recap of how information was conceptualized, produced, and leveraged in the cases of my focus. I continue this discussion by making explicit how an information order enables these analyses and conclude by highlighting the role and range of politics encapsulated in each case.

## DEFINING INFORMATION

In chapter 3, I examined how the three cases I presented came to be associated with particular ways of thinking about information and its attributes. A number of factors, including funding concerns, ideology, the constituencies they worked with, and even disciplinary emphasis shaped how each case came to its specific conceptions. In this section, I will examine what constituted information in each case, why, and what properties were associated with it on paper. In subsequent sections, I delve deeper into how these conceptions worked in practice, but here my focus is on how information was understood by the creators of these initiatives, by funding agencies, and in the popular imagination.[1]

In the case of the Kerala fishers, it was price information that gained emphasis. As my coauthor and I have argued elsewhere (Srinivasan and Burrell 2015), economist Jensen's (2007) findings that the introduction of mobile phones had reduced price dispersion among fish markets on the Kerala coast by allowing fishers and buyers to share supply, demand, and price information in different locations guided this emphasis. By "conception" of information, here, I am referring to the most common understanding of information that diverse populations in the ICTD space—researchers, designers, community organizations, actors in the telecom and financial sectors, and policymakers—took away from this popular case and applied to their theorizing and/or their technology and policy design. Price was understood as being determined by the economic laws of supply and demand of fish on a given day. Meanwhile, price information, once determined thus, could move from

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person to person as an objective fact with the use of ICTs such as mobile phones. This smooth-flowing price information, in turn, was seen to improve the functioning of the market (largely through the reduction of information asymmetries), fundamentally shaping people's economic decisions about which market and buyer they chose to sell to as well as the volume of wastage and their income levels. The material form of price information—whether it was oral or visual, handwritten, digitized, and so forth—was important (if at all) only in terms of accessibility; it was treated as secondary (if not outright dismissed) in how price was arrived at in the first place.

In general, social relations and the material form of information were peripheral to this understanding of price information and its circulation using ICTs. Thus, that price information helps farmers' income became the primary idea; in what circumstances this held, and for what kinds of farmers, crops, markets, or processes of selling and buying appeared incidental, if not absent, in most such analyses. As chapter 3 fleshed out in detail, price information platforms (largely text-based) such as Esoko, Nokia Life, and Reuters Market Light, which are available in many countries today, as well as more country-specific government or private portals that offer price information among other services, such as Mandi on Mobile (India), Ningxia ICT Project (China), and MFarm (Kenya), reflect this prevalent view of price information. I suggest that this conception and associated insights are colored significantly by an economistic understanding of what constitutes information and how it circulates.

If the disciplines of economics and design shaped the conception of information popularized by the Kerala case, the Swaminathan Foundation and the IDRC were key actors in conceptualizing it for the IVRP. The IVRP was pivoted around the idea of information shops that would provide location-specific, value-added information. Chapter 3 highlighted the long sequence of steps between the initial conceptions at the 1992 Dialogue on Information Technology, subsequent funding by the IDRC in 1997, and the setting up of the physical infrastructure of the IVRP by 1999. Discussions on information also evolved through this seven-year period, shaped especially by the priorities of both the foundation and the project's potential funders. The Swaminathan Foundation's prior work in the region shaped the project location, what it labeled as information, and the ICTs it chose to use. Meanwhile, it was the IDRC that wanted the IVRP to be structured as a research project with inbuilt evaluation mechanisms to gauge the impacts of information in such a project.

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By the time the IVRP received funding from the IDRC in 1998 and started taking shape in Puducherry, fundamental ideas about information were more or less agreed upon: overall, information primarily included details related to agriculture and to government welfare schemes. Additionally, in the initial stages of the IVRP, there was a fair bit of emphasis on information flowing two ways; thus, contributions from village residents were also to be on the list of information transacted at village information shops. Materially, information was to be transacted using a range of ICTs including computers, public announcement systems, and blackboards. Finally, as a research project, the IVRP's objective was to evaluate the positive effects of information on village residents. This objective implicitly relied on an understanding of information as quantifiable and also as separable from other social and material factors that shaped life in the village for its purposes of impact evaluation. Crucially, while the IVRP did see social, economic, and political factors as important in *eventually* shaping information use by different populations within the village (as reflected in its careful selection of the location of information shops, the range of details and services being provided at the shop, and the types of ICTs used), these factors were never seen as fundamentally *constituting* the information provided at these shops.

The MKSS case differs from the previous two in that MKSS's conceptions of information followed—rather than preceding—several years of activism focused on rural poverty in Rajasthan. Its discussion of information built on its growing focus on documents following its minimum wage and land campaigns in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Especially in the period after the Beawar dharna in 1996 (i.e., a period beyond the one I discuss in this book), this focus on information also enabled linking to the growing global focus on transparency and RTI legislation (Florini 2007; Jha 2019; Sharma 2016). At the start, MKSS saw a use for government documents as material artifacts around which it could organize protests relating to public works, minimum wages, and corruption. While its earliest conceptions of information were all tied to specific paper documents, the shift to demanding a Right to *Information* started appearing consistently in campaigns involving MKSS only by 1995–1996.

It is crucial to note here that, unlike the other cases examined so far, MKSS's conception and handling of information did not hinge on treating official records as the objective truth; nor did its value lie in offering "the truth." This made MKSS's conception quite different than the other cases

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where the veracity of information was never in question. MKSS's focus was on making visible the gap between official records and people's lived experiences. The demand for photocopies of official records and the attempts to present them orally at public hearings, for instance, were both anchored in this idea of contrasting people's versions of what happened with that presented by official records as a way to understand corruption in practice. Relatedly, MKSS recognized that existing structures (bureaucratic and of caste and class) and attitudes (toward workers, deciding who was a deserving worker, and so on) played a big role in creating official records (how they were populated, what categories they included, what material form they were in, when they were deemed legitimate, and so forth) as also the benefits accruing from them. In this way, the value of information was neither intrinsic nor universal from the MKSS's point of view in this phase of its work.

Thus, disciplinary emphasis, funding concerns, ideology, and the constituencies they worked with all shaped how the three cases came to be linked to particular conceptions of information. In turn, these conceptions allowed for a greater or lesser emphasis on the social and material underpinnings of how information (as defined in each case) was produced and who was able to use it. In the next two sections, I examine how visible the social relations and material artifacts of an information order were in the production and use of information as defined in this section for each case, and with what political implications.

## PRODUCING INFORMATION

Bayly (2000) defines information as "observations perceived at a relatively low level of conceptual definition, on the validity of whose claims to truth people from different regions, cultures and linguistic groups might broadly agree" in contrast to knowledge which is "socially organized and taxonomized" (4). But finding a level "low" enough to fit this description was not always feasible: as detailed in the previous section, I found that the information that was sought or provided in each case was always already organized or taxonomized at some level. Who organized it, and based on what principle, depended on an existing social and information order. What also held across the cases was that information did not just exist out there but was always produced. The three cases highlighted the range of actors who were engaged in producing it and their relative in/visibility.

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In the Kerala price information case, price was supposed to emerge naturally from the supply and demand conditions in the market, and then circulate among the fishing community. However, the mechanisms and negotiations by which this price "emerges" have rarely been the topic of investigation in mainstream economic studies. What we saw in chapter 4 was how price information was actively constructed by fishers, vendors, and auctioneers in view of their concerns ranging from maintaining long-term market ties and the skilled craftsmanship of auctioneers to the material affordances of cash. Theoretically, a price signal already indirectly incorporates several of these factors since they would also have directly affected supply and demand levels in parallel. However, the reification of price information ensures invariably that these mechanisms—that fundamentally shape the price that "emerges"—get sidelined or completely obscured in discussions that foreground price information. Moreover, the actors and material artifacts involved in these processes remain invisible too, fueling an understanding of price information as something that automatically emerges and then circulates autonomously and in a disembodied fashion according to the laws of price.

Keeping these actors and social relations at the center, on the other hand (and as the information order construct would suggest), provides a somewhat different understanding of the process. Take, for instance, the fishers and fish vendors, both of whom were motivated with maintaining their long-term trade relations. This objective meant they were willing to negotiate prices with their regular buyers or sellers and were also flexible about buying or selling to them at slightly lower prices than the market price. Indeed, in this, the selling of fish in 2016 was not very different than the accounts from the 1980s of small-scale female fish vendors (Kurien 1984). After several days of work at sea, fishers were also interested in selling their fish quickly so they could rest or relax at the earliest, rather than spending time hunting out the best price. Fish vendors, especially the women, had domestic constraints on how long they could stay at the market or engage in selling their fish. Often, this would mean they could not stay waiting for the best price, but rather were interested in selling off quickly what fish they had left over to return to their domestic duties. Auctioneers too played at least as crucial a part in determining the price at which fish was finally bought or sold, leveraging their knowledge of buyers and sellers, as did the demand for and supply of fish at a given time and place. Those auctioneers who wore multiple hats, sometimes acting both as investor-auctioneers for fishers and as managers

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for exporting companies (i.e., buyers), for instance, had different interests to factor in while determining a starting price at an auction.

How prices were announced, accepted, and negotiated at auctions was also shaped by the globalization of fish markets and the history of activism by fishers' unions and cooperatives in this region. As chapter 4 detailed, the latter had fundamentally shaped how credit relations and public auctions functioned in the region. Where, earlier, the person who lent capital to fishers to purchase and operate their fishing boats and equipment could unilaterally decide the price at which he would buy their fish, fish was now merely *auctioned* by that creditor and that too at a public auction, which ensured some level of competition. The presence of several auctioneers employed by fishers' cooperatives, in particular, was also supposed to bring down collusion among auctioneers or between buyers since these auctioneers were (at least theoretically) tasked with prioritizing the fishers' interests. Finally, the material form of exchange (cash) also decided the final price that was paid for the fish at auctions and markets. I presented in chapter 4 an example where small-scale fish vendors were able to get away with paying less than the auctioned price, citing lack of change. Thus, while economic laws may help understand the final average price at which a given variety of fish is bought or sold in the region on a given day/time, social relations and material artifacts shaped how this price is *arrived at* in practice and its value for different categories of buyers and sellers. Far from being an automatic emergence of prices, the construction of prices (and relatedly, price information) needs to be understood as an active, political process involving many actors and social relations as examined above.

The production of information was even more explicit in the IVRP case. Chapter 3 detailed what the IVRP chose to provide as information at its VKCs and how, while chapter 5 laid out how this provisioning took place in practice. The Swaminathan Foundation and IDRC documents from the time the project was conceptualized, as well as the testimonies of former and current VKC operators and hub personnel, indicate that entitlement details to be posted at the VKC were culled from government orders and officials. Village-level details, meanwhile, were gathered directly from residents to build databases at VKCs, including the one at Kilipet. In addition to these, other content on agriculture, weather, and livelihoods was filtered once collected and underwent a "value add" process (through customization, translation, and so forth) at the hub, prior to being shared with VKCs

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for further dissemination. The material form of providing these details was also discussed among hub personnel and operators. Operators would write down the day's news and news pertaining to livelihood opportunities on the blackboard. They would also announce schemes and deadlines on the public announcement system, which was what most residents associated with the VKC. Sometimes, residents would follow up with a face-to-face meeting at the VKC. The process of information production, thus, involved hub and VKC operators as well as Swaminathan Foundation personnel, all of whom made decisions on what to include and how to present it at different stages of the information provisioning process. The foundation did not want "political" news announced, for instance. To operationalize this, hub personnel decided that VKCs would not announce news about specific political parties. However, announcements regarding government schemes were allowed. Since most schemes were strongly associated with specific political parties in practice, I found that the purpose of this distinction was defeated.

Finally, one other process of information production—unanticipated at the project's inception—also took place at the VKCs: VKC operators were increasingly sought out by government officials to verify details about village residents' life conditions and their eligibility for specific government schemes. As I showed in the case of the Kilipet VKC, to answer this question, operators ended up applying their own criteria of who was deserving. Thus, this became yet another way in which VKCs, rather than just transmitting information as originally intended, produced information that affected residents' lives. Much like in the Kerala case, I find here too that, far from the vision of information shops that provided pre-packaged, objective information, paying attention to the channels, forms, and agents of communication of an information order shows us that information for the VKC was being produced by a range of actors and refracted through their vision for and understanding of the project, the village community, and the state.

In the MKSS case, it was mostly the state that produced the information that the campaigns were interested in and clamoring to see. Furthermore, this information was governed by laws, procedures, and guidelines including the Famine Code, Official Secrets Act, and Minimum Wage laws that also were produced by the state. Muster rolls, which proved to be the bones of contention in several of the minimum wage campaigns, were written and signed by bureaucrats and administrators paid by the state: workers at the public worksites could neither be part of their creation nor even access them. Moreover,

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the very design and layout of documents such as the muster roll encoded some of these rules and attitudes about who was deemed "deserving" and how their work was valued or compensated. MKSS's campaigns were involved both in the creation and modification of laws, rules, and document templates and in the use of these laws, rules, and templates to produce records. A court case challenging the wages paid by the Rajasthan government would be an example of the first, while filling out a muster roll with the details of a particular worksite could be an example of the second. Both these categories of activities involved active production of information, and it was impossible to treat any of these rules or documents as already formed, static entities.

Instead, state-citizen relations, as well as relations between workers, activists, and bureaucrats, fundamentally shaped who produced information and what material form it took. Furthermore, neither of these levels of information fit Bayly's definition of information as low-level enough to merit wide agreement (Bayly 2000, 3); in fact, MKSS's campaigns were structured explicitly to focus on them as points around which dissent could coalesce. Arguably, it was in encouraging workers to produce their own counter testimonies to the state's records about the work they had performed, and in presenting those in oral and written form at public hearings with the help of MKSS activists, that MKSS's campaigns achieved the most.

Briefly then, information that naturally exists in the world, emerges automatically, or is conceptually low-level enough that it is agreed upon across social and cultural locations, is rare—if not altogether impossible or absent. In all my cases, I found, instead, that information was always produced, that this production involved a range of actors and artifacts, and consequently, that this act of production (including decisions about what needs to be produced, how it will be produced, who will be allowed to produce it, and so on) was always political. Further, in the MKSS case, this production also included the calling out of intentionally falsified information in official records, a process that was even more explicitly political. In the next section, I show that how this information was leveraged, once produced, was equally political.

## LEVERAGING INFORMATION

Once information was conceptualized to include certain elements and was produced accordingly, the next question was: who could leverage it? While

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the cases I examined mostly conceived of information as something that everyone could leverage, in paying attention to the channels, forms, and agents of communication, I found that social relations and material form crucially shaped who could use it in practice even if they had access to it.

Let us start with the fishers in Kerala. As chapter 4 demonstrated, only a certain category of fishers made their decisions to sell or buy based solely (or even primarily) on the price of fish—to that extent, the availability of price information did not directly affect the actions or decisions of several categories of actors in the market. It was the larger players in that market, who had the larger boats and brought in or bought larger volumes of fish, who were the most able to leverage price information in their decisions. Having a large volume of a single species of fish meant that even a small difference in per unit price would make a substantial difference to the fisher's income. As chapter 4 detailed, this is turn depended on the type of fishing boats and equipment and, further, on the geography.[2] Fishers with larger boats that were focused on sardines dominated the northern coast of Kerala, while the south was home to smaller boats with fishers using hook-and-line fishing for tuna and squid, and smaller nets for sardines and anchovies. The former boat types were typically financed by multiple investor-auctioneers, and fishers were able to sell in the different markets that their various auctioneers called home. In the south, boats were typically financed by individual investor-auctioneers and, hence, more closely associated with a specific market. Finally, the north had many more all-season landing centers clustered together where fishers could choose to sell, while the centers on the southern coast typically closed during the rough monsoons because of their terrain. For all these reasons, price information was inquired into and leveraged more in the north than in the south.

Further, not all circulation of price information was solely through mobile phones, with individuals using a mix of face-to-face and phone-based communication to share price information. Moreover, as argued previously, even where price information was known, a number of other concerns such as the maintenance of long-term trading relations and the need to sell or buy quickly ultimately decided whether/how fishers used price information in the decisions to sell or buy fish at a given time and place. A cross-cutting factor that shaped who was able to leverage price information was gender. Women were only engaged as small-scale vendors and only in southern Kerala for a variety of religious and historical reasons. Their

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access to capital—even to buy phones or vehicles—was limited. Sreekumar (2011) points out that women only purchased phones much after the male fishers. Even once they did, and even when they knew the price of fish in different markets, their ability to reach those markets to buy fish was more limited than of men, who typically had motorbikes or vans. Women relied on buses or shared autos to get around, which meant that they were often not able to reach distant markets as quickly as men. This is an instance where individuals might have been aware of price but unable to act on that information despite wanting to. Thus, who got access to price information and who was able to act on it continued to be heavily shaped by relations of class, religion, and gender.

In the case of the IVRP, chapter 5 showed how village residents were required to possess identity and ownership documents such as 64-evidence and patta to prove their eligibility for public schemes and entitlements from the government. When residents did not possess these documents, and since they were also not allowed to create these documents themselves, they had to go to a bureaucrat or a politician to negotiate. In other cases, such as with the 100 days' work announcements, despite knowing the provisions of the scheme, residents could not leverage what they knew given the scheme's delayed implementation in their village. Thus, information about the entitlements did not automatically facilitate any transactions in these cases. Instead, it was the cultural location of a Swaminathan Foundation employee, a VKC operator, or a village resident that shaped how each could leverage information from the VKC successfully. Indeed, Kilipet residents desired to leverage the foundation's social networks, rather than information from the VKC, to negotiate with local-level bureaucrats and politicians in resolving their problems. They saw their protests against the VKC demolition as a successful example of such action, but they also articulated a need for similar actions to resolve the patta and other village-level issues that were pending.[3] The attempts to petition foundation personnel and others related to the IVRP on these issues can be seen as instances of an active pursuit of this hope.

In the MKSS campaigns as well, an elaborate set of laws and rules decided who could access government records and documents, and who was required to possess documents to avail themselves of public schemes. Access to muster rolls and land records was limited to the bureaucrats who created them and their higher-ups. In many cases, the reason MKSS's campaigns were able to procure documents or influence the information order was because

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of their own influential social networks that included bureaucrats, activist groups, academics, and the press.[4] Inviting a central government commission to look into nonpayment of workers in public works, approaching sympathetic higher-level bureaucrats to procure public works documents, or attracting eminent people to lead their public hearings and address the Beawar dharna offer some examples that highlight how MKSS was able to leverage its networks to shape a campaign around information. While none of this would have been possible without its long-term political engagement and campaigns, some of these shifts were facilitated at least partly by the legitimacy and social connections conferred by Roy's status as a former bureaucrat. Thus, social connections proved crucial to leverage information during the RTI campaigns.

Thus, overall and across cases, I found that information was far from being something that everyone could leverage, as social relations and material form crucially shaped who could use it and toward what end. Often, since it was precisely a lack of the right social networks that had marginalized people in the first instance, the mere injection of information into the process just changed *how* networks needed to be tapped without drastically shifting *who* could tap into them. And that shift, I found, could only be achieved by first recognizing and then rethinking the underlying politics of how information was being defined, produced, and leveraged. Yet, the foregrounding of information ended up obscuring precisely these politics. Might the construct of an information order help bring politics back to the forefront?

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF USING AN INFORMATION ORDER: A ROLE FOR POLITICS?

Before I explore the consequences of using an information order, a note on how I operationalized it. I combined the information order construct and its emphasis on the channels, forms, and agents of communication, as well as on the arrangement of information systems, with an ethnographic approach and *its* emphasis on a holistic understanding and on practice. This methodological melding shaped what I was able to observe of how information circulated in the cases I examined. While my goal in this work was to build further on the information order construct itself, I appreciate that an application of this construct could have relied on alternative methods and approaches of collecting data. I can especially imagine studies that

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rely solely on interviews, content analysis, or archival research in this regard. Regardless of the methods deployed, two insights from my work can speak to future applications of the information order construct that wish to move beyond a monolithic understanding of information and especially those that are interested in questions of power and politics. First, studying different phases in the cycle of information initiatives—I identified the definition, production, and use of information, for instance—will be important while making sense of an information order. Second, paying attention to diverse channels and agents of communication also will be crucial in going beyond a singular analysis of information. As an example, I examined paper, digital, written, and oral formats of records, and focused on the targeted population, civil society, and state (and heterogeneities within each) while tracing the circulation of information. Together, these two insights can provide useful entry points to study information and to operationalize an information order analysis.

Returning now to the consequences of using an information order the way I did in this study. In examining how something was identified as information, produced, and leveraged, the broader point at hand was a critique of an economistic, demand-supply understanding of information. Both the case of the Kerala fishers and the working of an IVRP information shop illustrated how such an understanding of information made both the social relations involved in the circulation of information, and material form, invisible. Important questions—such as how demand was generated, how it was made a force to reckon with, whose demands were treated as important, what was the nature of supply, or how records were created and categorized—were never asked when information was perceived solely within a demand-supply framework. Moreover, the value of information was also assumed and defined outside a social, economic, and political context. I have already shown earlier why this assumption that information is universally valued did not hold for all: details about government schemes were not necessarily valuable to people who were never able to satisfy the prerequisites for schemes or did not have the social connections required to be chosen for a loan or a job; similarly, price information was not equally important to everyone in the fish supply chain in their decisions on where or whom to sell to. Overall, characterizing use in the language of information-seekers or information-producers framed these as activities that were undertaken independently of the rest of people's lives. It was precisely this separation

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that the "information order" construct helped me avoid. Using it instead of "information," allowed me to challenge the reification of information into a single thing that acts on its own in the world, instead highlighting the social relations that make it valuable for various populations.

The central role that I placed on material form in the working of an information order helped me build further on Bayly's construct. Whether it was details of price or of a government scheme, a law, public works documents, or records, it mattered whether these were communicated over a phone call, on paper, on a blackboard, or were being read out as seen in the sharing of prices through auction cries versus mobile phones in chapter 4, the working of the Kilipet VKC in chapter 5, and the need for a paper trail in the minimum wage campaigns, public hearings, and the Beawar dharna in chapter 6. The public hearings in chapter 6 illustrated how technical language and the written form further obscured the claims made by records. This is why reorganizing the records and reading them out loud before and during public hearings changed the social meaning of the records. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 clearly illustrated that material form was so important to how these documents and records were used, and by whom, that *what* the documents said could not be thought of as distinct from the material form in which they said it. Information could (and should) not, therefore, be imagined as free-floating stuff that is contained in a material form: material form is part of what constitutes this information.[5]

My conception of an information order also departed from Bayly's in some ways, and using this modified construct also had implications for what I was able to see. While Bayly focused on an information order as a more or less autonomous formation, I explored how it was shaped by a social order and then went on to shape that social order, albeit in small ways. Moreover, while Bayly largely focused on an information order at a specific point in time and as more or less static for that time, I examined both how information orders were maintained and reproduced, and how they change over time. In all three cases, the information order was being constantly shaped by a population that was not passive and resisted the officially mandated information order (whether through organized political action or through everyday negotiations). For instance, the fishers' movement in Kerala challenged (and continues to challenge) how fish was bought and sold, and at what prices since the 1970s. This helped reshape the auctioning system and continues to affect the emergence of price in Kerala's present-day fish

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markets and auctions. The IVRP case illustrated the importance of social or political connections when village residents with the right social connections could approach an MLA to get their records straightened out.[6] MKSS's campaigns also provided many examples where activists were able to approach sympathetic higher-level bureaucrats to get things done and elements of the information order changed. Both long-term political engagement and the social connections conferred by some of the MKSS activists' middle-class credentials and bureaucratic connections contributed to this ability. Other aspects of an existing social order—such as the blurred boundaries between state and population, and a state that was not monolithic in practice—also helped reshape the information order. Take, for instance, how the minimum wage campaigns detailed in chapter 6 leveraged the differences between the central and state-level government to bring about the payment of minimum wages. At the same time, a changing information order also shaped the social order to an extent. New agents in an information order, such as the KWs of the Kilipet VKC, could now act as verifiers of social facts for the state and other entities, even though they were not themselves state agents, and, theoretically, only state agents were allowed to produce such information: thus, the social relations within the village were also shaped by changes in its information order. Thus, information orders were continually shaping and being reshaped by the social order they worked through.

Another way in which I used the information order differently than Bayly was in examining its working at two levels: on paper and in practice. Chapter 6 showed how elements of the information order were not set in stone, with different interpretations of laws, rules, and procedures coexisting in practice, albeit uneasily, even where the laws and procedures themselves were fixed. Sometimes, these differences even provided opportunities to shift an information order or make small changes to its different elements. The minimum wage campaigns in Rajasthan, for example, illustrated how the information order on paper was not adopted in practice because the underlying assumptions of older rules and procedures continued to be influential even after the rules and procedures themselves underwent changes. Thus, bureaucrats resisted following the court's orders about the payment of minimum wages in famine relief works, with members of the bureaucracy continuing to work with underlying assumptions about "lazy" workers and public works schemes as a dole from the government. They refused to

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treat relief worksites as legitimate sites of employment where assets could be created. Thus, not only do I agree with Bayly that information orders need to be analyzed in their own right (though, in contrast to Bayly and, as I pointed out previously, I submit that information orders cannot be treated as altogether autonomous), I further suggest that their workings have to be studied separately in the realms of procedure/law and in practice.

Overall, whether I focused on how information orders were maintained, reproduced, or changed; on how they further shaped social orders; or on their distinct workings on paper and in practice, I found that power and politics were key to all analyses involving information orders. In arriving at the construct of an information order, Bayly argues that theorists like Foucault, who treated knowledge and information as subsumed in systems of power, gave rise to a totalizing discourse that left little place for subordinated knowledges. That is why Bayly defines an information order as a heuristic that stands prior to, and somewhat autonomous from, systems of power. In this way, he finds an information order a useful way to counter the totalizing discourse and to bring back subordinated knowledges into the conversation. Based on the cases I presented, I find that neither seeing information orders as subsumed in power nor—at the other extreme—characterizing them as autonomous (and thus as almost divorced from systems of power) is particularly helpful when our goal is to understand how information orders change or stay the same. What I have done, instead, is to leverage the construct of an information order to identify *how* it is embedded within systems of power and in what ways the deployment of specific conceptions of information within this information order (de) politicizes processes of change in both information and social orders. Such a focus also provides me an opportunity to engage with the critiques of development initiatives that characterize such interventions as "anti-politics machines" and with which I started this book (Benjamin et al. 2007; Ferguson 1994).

My final contribution to Bayly's idea of an information order is to expand its definition to also encompass the understandings of information that animate it. An important way in which power operates is through the very conceptions of information that characterize an information order. In the story of nineteenth-century India that Bayly narrated, the term information came from him. What he described as information was unlikely to have been described as such (not just in English but in any language) by the people who inhabited his story. However, in the twentieth- and

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twenty-first-century stories I tell, the term information was an important character and the information narratives that were adopted, critical. In the concluding chapter, I demarcate the types of politics made visible or invisible by the distinct narratives of information adopted in the three cases. I further analyze what happens when the benefits of leveraging a universal term in the abstract clash with the reality of diverse information orders in practice.

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# 8

# THE POLITICAL LIVES OF INFORMATION

## INTRODUCTION

In a move away from highlighting and naturalizing information, the previous chapter used the heuristic of an information order to foreground the social and material roots of information. It illustrated how the information order construct made it easier to see the politics of how information was variously defined, produced, and leveraged in the three cases of my focus. In this concluding chapter, I extend the concept of an information order to examine how the term information itself shapes the order's working. Contrary to Bayly's definition of information as low level enough that everyone agrees to it, I argue that, in fact, the power to label some things information and others not is at least as significant as the capacity to then produce, access, or leverage it. And thus, where chapter 7 fleshed out the politics involved in materially producing and using information in the world, this chapter highlights how the very conception and circulation of the term information constituted politics in the cases I studied. Throughout, the chapter shows the range of politics involved in the circulation of information as an idea/term and in its varied material instantiations.

The chapter begins by summarizing the different kinds of politics in play with the information initiatives I examined. Following this, the chapter shifts focus to the *narratives* about information and the politics of how these circulated in each case. The next section examines the challenges encountered when the rhetoric of information faces varied material realities in practice. This brings us to the politics of decontextualization that is involved in the translation of conceptions of information into practice. This chapter and the book come to a close by laying out the application of this work and possible futures for its lines of inquiry.

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## THE POLITICS OF INFORMATION INITIATIVES

It should be apparent by now that the three cases I examined reacted very differently to the inclusion of politics in their conception of and/or work with information. By politics and politicization, I refer here to activities that acknowledge and/or act on the power relations within a community; depoliticization, meanwhile, is a dismissal of the role of politics in a process. The popular analysis of the Kerala case, as well as further studies and technology design that drew on this analysis, denied or downplayed the significance of politics and at times even its presence, in explaining the relationship between price information and livelihoods. The Swaminathan Foundation accepted that politics shaped village life but thought it possible to dissociate its own work with the IVRP from those politics. MKSS embraced politics—in fact, it described itself as a political movement—as it undertook the Right to Information campaigns. Further, "politics" in the three cases was not restricted only to how each reacted (differently) to the inclusion of existing power relations in its conception of an initiative and with what consequences. Instead, the three cases also provide examples of the equally varied types of political action that they themselves *gave rise* to. Below, I examine the range of politics in which the three cases were imbricated in both these ways.

The easiest type of politics to analyze is the organized variety: was organized political activity present or absent in each case I examined? The MKSS case I narrated was the story of an organized political movement attempting to change an entrenched information order in which states and citizens had very different powers and access to records. Needless to reiterate, MKSS's organized political action (in the form of its public writings, campaigns, fighting cases in court, and so on) shaped the definition, production, and use of information within this order, as described in great detail in the previous chapter. In the Kerala case too, I argued that political action by fishers' unions and movements in the 1960s onwards not only significantly shaped the political economy of fishing in present-day Kerala but more specifically its information order and who produces, accesses, and is able to use price information within it. Thus, organized political action both shaped and resulted from shifts in the information order in these cases.

While these kinds of campaigns by organized political movements are progressive in their intentions and processes, Benjamin (2007) argues that

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they are nevertheless "taught" to a population. He asserts that there exists another kind of politics, a "politics of stealth," which is not visible and that is "learnt" by people through their everyday encounters (545). In describing how land use conflicts are resolved at the local level in a densely populated urban context, Benjamin states that "the issue is not the absolute resolution of these conflicts but the existence of a level of administration and politics that resolves these safely even if unevenly" (545). He argues that the politics of stealth is important for the populations of his focus because they do not necessarily want to be visible to the state, at least not all the time.[1] I showed in chapter 5 that the residents who dealt with the history, and multiple layers of connections shaping the political terrain of Kilipet on an everyday basis, knew only too well what they could reasonably hope to get from public schemes. What they either had or lacked and were constantly in the process of building, were social and political connections with which they could operate safely and profitably in the existing information order. Further, Kilipet residents did not want to be either legible or illegible to the state on a regular basis. What they found useful was to be able to negotiate when they could operate visibly and when they could deploy the politics of stealth.[2] Without overstating the amount of choice they had available, residents did not always choose to work through organized political campaigning to achieve their goals.[3] In this complex situation, the politics of stealth potentially opens up new spaces for action, and it is worth asking what such spaces can offer for an analysis of information orders.

Another example of invisible politics is what remained unacknowledged by the otherwise explicitly political RTI campaign I have been discussing. Pande (2014) and Sharma (2014) point out the extent to which the social networks of the activists and their association with eminent personalities was important to the process of enacting the RTI Act. Indeed, Sharma argues that the popular narrative about the enactment of the RTI ends up flattening and depoliticizing reality by not talking about MKSS's own politics, whether in the role it accorded to the "grassroots" versus bureaucrats or in remaining silent on the role of global politics in making the passage of the RTI possible in India. Nor are these invisible politics limited to the *creation* of the RTI Act: examining the working of the RTI Act on the ground some years after it was passed, Webb argues that it is knowledge ("jaankaari") among local nonprofits or activists' organizations about which social networks to leverage, rather

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than the substantive content or information ("soochana") brought in by an RTI request, that really shapes the working of RTI in practice (Webb 2013).

Thus, the point is not just that politics always shape the working and negotiating of information orders. It is not even that these initiatives that attempted to rework these information orders may themselves give rise to political action. As important as these insights is another that suggests we need to further parse what *kinds* of political action are involved, what is required to undertake such action, and who within a population can afford to undertake them more or less visibly.

## THE POLITICS OF THEIR INFORMATION NARRATIVES

So far, I have focused on how specific information orders have shaped the types of politics that come into play in how information circulates as a thing in the world. But how about the term information? How does that circulate within an information order and—here is my contention—also partially *constitute* that order? Chapters 1 and 3 argued that the fuzziness and ambiguity of the term information, as well as the possibility of using it in abstract and particularistic senses, made it amenable for use by many groups in their distinctive work; chapters 4, 5, and 6 confirmed this argument based on empirical material from the working of these cases on the ground. I explored the different senses in which the discipline of economics and creators of price information platforms, the Swaminathan Foundation and MKSS used the term, and how each of these groups was able to frame it in alignment with its distinct objectives and political ideologies. Thus, in the first case, the use of mobile phones to facilitate the circulation of price information among fishers offered a way to celebrate the role of not only mobile phones but also the working of a free market in improving livelihoods. With the IVRP, the design of the project drew on the Swaminathan Foundation's expertise in agricultural research and policy to help collect and curate information that it then hoped to offer to information seekers at village information shops. Furthermore, this process was to be carried out with minimum involvement from the foundation or IVRP in village-level politics. MKSS fashioned its idea of information drawing on its previous experience with government documents and insights from its previous political campaigns. Information in this case was aligned with MKSS's ideology and its organization as a political people's movement. Thus, in all three cases, the term information proved flexible

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enough that these three groups with very different ideologies and structures could leverage it in their distinct spheres of work.

If groups with different ideologies were able to leverage the same term, the malleability of the term also allowed the coming together of unlikely allies *within* the work of each of these groups. Information acted as a boundary object or idea to bring together people who might otherwise not have been able to work together. It was "both adaptable to different viewpoints and robust enough to maintain identity across them" (Star and Griesemer 1989, 387). While the use of the term might not have established consensus between groups, it nevertheless allowed them to at least work with each other while ignoring or overlooking a lack of consensus. For example, it allowed for linkages between rural and urban groups, working class and middle-class groups, and people from different occupations within a class to participate in a common dharna in Beawar. Similarly, the term acted as a boundary object allowing collaboration between agricultural scientists, policymakers, funders, researchers, and NGO-based implementers in the case of the IVRP, and especially as part of the 1992 dialogue that kicked off thinking about the project. As others have since pointed out, price information has lately become the glue that binds together several disciplinary communities: ICTD, computer science, and economics (Burrell and Oreglia 2015). Indeed, it is precisely because information is such an effective boundary object that it becomes difficult or appears unnecessary to look beyond it to understand the political economy and social order in which it circulates. Nevertheless, this "looking beyond" was the hard task that chapter 7 attempted, using the construct of an information order.

What all of this also makes clear is that the multiple conceptions of information partially but fundamentally *constituted* the information order within which the term then circulated. How so? While the groups I studied had fairly powerful, extensive, and diverse networks, it was partially the use of this term that made it possible for them to even leverage these networks at the times they did. The Kerala case became an exemplar for understanding the benefits of price information disseminated via mobile phones partly because of the centrality of information in the discipline of economics since the 1970s, as well as among technologists and ICTD practitioners since the 2000s. These also became the primary networks through which the idea of price information circulated. Likewise, the Swaminathan Foundation leveraged its own reputation and the networks of its founder, M. S. Swaminathan,

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to make the term information visible and the idea of information provision acceptable. But what also worked in their favor was the growing support for information provision and ICTs among development agencies, which further catapulted the foundation's ideas and work with Information Villages to fame. For MKSS, the growing emphasis on transparency and Freedom of Information legislations around the globe further fed the circulation of the term in the years following the period described in chapter 6. In this way, the valence of the term information in a time period and within specific social networks shaped its circulation as well as the information order itself. To that extent, prevalent conceptions of the term information also need to be included in the definition of an information order instead of focusing on the channels, forms, and agents of communication alone.

## FROM CONCEPTION TO PRACTICE: THE POLITICS OF DISEMBEDDING AND DECONTEXTUALIZATION

This chapter and the previous have summarized how the reification of information and the use of the term information came with both costs (obscuring the social and material roots of information as detailed last in chapter 7) and benefits (helping garner support from diverse constituencies and in the context of their quite distinct work) for those using it. Further, these costs and benefits did not operate separately. Instead, how broadly information was framed (that is, what it denoted, what attributes it was perceived to have, and what changes it was supposed to make possible) had direct implications for how embedded its material manifestations could be in a particular constellation of social relations. The more information was reified and described as self-standing or as having intrinsic properties and value, the less embedded the things labeled information on the ground were in the social realities and structures of a region. However, the more information was reified, the more appealing it was as an idea, the farther it traveled, and the more universally accepted it became as a solution. This conflict between reifying and embedding was visible in the three cases in different ways.

In the case of the paper on price information circulation among Kerala fishers, the fundamental takeaways from Jensen's papers became that (a) price information improved the livelihoods of fishers; and (b) mobile phones could be instrumental in making such price information available. While the paper itself introduced several caveats around the research, its findings,

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and its generalizability, it was these takeaways (not the caveats) that went on to shape the work of development agencies and technologists, as seen in the frequent reference to this article in the documents of development agencies of various kinds, and in the proliferation of price information platforms (We had counted more than 200 such platforms in 2013). The comfortingly homogenous category of price information in these insights paid little attention to the diversity of producers or to the social and material relations that animated their lives in specific places. Similarly, with the IVRP, it was the abstract ideas of information shops and "information provision," that found purchase and went on to further influence designers and discussions of ICTD projects among state and nonstate-based funding and implementing agencies at the global and regional levels who were concerned about scaling. With MKSS's work too, the shift from focusing solely on muster rolls to focusing on documents ("kaagaz") more generally to demanding a right to "information"—a set of steps that made information progressively more reified—resulted in an increase in the volume and diversity of its supporters.

However, even as information circulated far as a term in the three cases, what was required for its material instantiation to circulate in a place was an understanding of the information order of *that* place. This posed a dilemma. For instance, in the Swaminathan Foundation and MKSS cases, this circulation would necessarily involve understanding the nature of relations between the state and a population at the sites where they operated. Only then could these groups ask how information would circulate within this social and information order, and further, what it would take for that information to maintain or change these orders. For this to be possible, it was not enough to comprehend merely the theoretical, high-level objectives of governance, or even the law and procedures of the land; instead, how governance was practiced in that place had to be observed and understood (recall, for instance, the changes in minimum wage legislation in Rajasthan on paper but its reluctant adoption in practice). Thus, in all three cases, I found there was significant tension between the reification of information as a concept in order to gain visibility and support, and the inevitable requirement to grapple with the specificities of place and time to deal with information in practice. This tension and its resolution formed the final—and perhaps most significant—category of the politics of information in the cases I focused on.

I would hasten to note here that the dynamic between specificities and universality (or, for that matter, between the concrete and the abstract, or

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the particular and the general) is not unique to the concept of information. In fact, this dynamic comes up frequently in discussions on a variety of interventions for change and especially around the scaling of interventions.[4] In their study of learning and knowledge, Chaiklin and Lave (1993) speak to this dynamic and its politics when they discuss contextualization and decontextualization: "the movement toward powerful (abstract, general) knowledge is movement away from engagement in the world, so that distance 'frees' knowers from the particularities of time, place, and ongoing activity" (23). Yet can the world ever be "described and comprehended in isolation from such local concerns, perspectives, and commitments?" asks Lave (1993, 24). While Lave's question might have been rhetorical, what are the implications of such a vision to the extent that it is attempted vis-à-vis information?

Lave (1993) argues that the process of decontextualization itself *creates* centers of control: only those undertaking the decontextualization can "resolve the ambiguity-through-decontextualization that has resulted, while others depend on these creators to disambiguate between situational and 'desituated' meaning" (25). Chaiklin and Lave (1993), in their edited volume, point to examples from a range of fields of activity, including education and mental health where "institutionally grounded representations predominate" and "the effect of technical language is to bracket and delegitimize the situated understanding of other participants" (e.g., psychiatrists' representations prevail over those of patients, and examination committees' representations prevail over those of students) (26). Similarly, artificial intelligence researchers "selectively reproduce, make relevant, extend, and transform problems and solutions given by their membership in progressively more specialized technical communities, each with its own assumptions, commitments, and identifying technologies" (27). Hull (2012b) makes a similar point using examples closer to the world this book explores when he concludes based on his study of the circulation of bureaucratic documents that "the more abstract the scheme, the more mediators required to link it to empirical objects" (166), as does Sriraman's (2018) study of identification documents in India (201). Decontextualization creates uncertainty and anxiety "about what is the right thing to do" for those encountering it, and also "creates grounds for blame" from the experts undertaking the decontextualization or subsequent recontextualization (Lave 1993, 23). Meanwhile, "the specific social practices involved in interactions around literal meaning" can become the means by which control is maintained and activities carried out

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efficiently (25). It is perhaps in this way that information is most political, and the least recognized as being so, in interventions of the kind I examined.

The three cases at the heart of this book illustrate to different extents the creation of these "centers of control." For instance, having defined what the IVRP meant by information in more abstract terms, the Swaminathan Foundation made decisions about what information to provide and what not to do through its information shops. This particularly applied to the provision of information or facilitation that was considered political. On their part, residents were puzzled about when the foundation chose to step in and when it stayed aloof, given that the IVRP's purported goal was to help the village residents improve their livelihoods. In the way the Kerala case has been picked up and discussed, economists and technology developers appear to wield more control than do the fishers and farmers for whom these systems are being designed. Thus, a focus on price information and automatic adjustments in markets, and on developing elegant, single-purpose platforms, takes precedence over the complex social calculations within which price information gets defined, shared, or used as part of transactions in markets. In the MKSS case too, more recent accounts of a legislation like RTI suggest that people rely on "jaankaari" from the right social networks, typically NGOs, to ask for and use information from the state even though the RTI legally allows them to directly approach the state for it. While this is not to negate the achievement of the RTI Act, it is important to note that new control centers have emerged in the wake of it, even as older centers have been modified, to decode the RTI Act and suggest how best to use it in a place. It is to account for these new mediators and centers of control that I add the invisible politics of definition and design to the other types of politics of information outlined so far.

Thus, right from the initial steps of decontextualizing information, to eventually recontextualizing it for use in a particular place and time, information-focused initiatives are shot through with politics. That information initiatives and information itself are always political is far from a bad thing. Rather than working toward finding the "lowest common denominator" (Bayly 2000, 4) or objective fact that everyone will agree to accept as information, toward isolating it (as impact evaluation studies attempt to do through control experiments), or toward adding things to it (information+experience=knowledge), it is by understanding the process of its construction, materialization, and labeling that the potential of information to be

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part of social change or reproduction can be truly understood. Information only makes sense in all its glorious messiness and interconnections, and it is these that we must leverage in future work.

## WHAT CAN THE PRESENT TELL US ABOUT THE FUTURE OF INFORMATION?

This book began as an attempt to understand the popular idea of information as power or as empowering. In the course of researching and writing the book, I found that while information is indeed inextricably intertwined with questions of power, that power is not an attribute or consequence of information. Instead, the production and use of information itself—both as a term and its reified, material instantiations in the world—emerges from and goes on to shape a tapestry of power relations. Moreover, I highlighted that in each instance, multiple types of politics were in play, including those generated by the information initiative itself.

I started this book from the "power" end of the "information is power" claim in the context of efforts targeting social change. I located my work within discussions on the depoliticizing tendencies of such efforts and tried to show how de/re-politicization worked in the information-focused cases I examined. While studies abound that tell us how technocrats have taken over and depoliticized social change with every new technology that came along, I have argued that the idea of information needs urgent examination because it goes a step further in the range of actors it ends up involving: it is not just technocrats but groups across the political spectrum (including those who believed in overt political action) that are willing to deploy information to overcome social ills.

The book operationalized its examination of information using information orders, an ethnographic approach, and multiple cases. In so doing, it moved the focus away from reified information to relational analyses of information initiatives in practice. This methodological approach allowed me to identify many aspects of the social and material roots of information that were obscured by its reification as worthy of examination in understanding its politics. One aspect was the process and phases involved in the circulation of information (its conceptualization, production, and use). A second important factor was the larger political economy within which some of these initiatives and the information order unfolded. For instance, economic

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liberalization in India in 1991 fundamentally shaped the functioning of the fish trade, including the actors involved, their priorities, the emergence of price, and the importance of price information on the beaches of Kerala. Liberalization also molded the attitudes of the Indian state toward its public works schemes and MKSS's decision to take on access to public records as a campaign issue. A third dimension was the significance of the material form of information in its circulation and use. A final dimension was that actors beyond the primary providers of information and its ultimate users—including the designers of an initiative and a variety of intermediaries such as auctioneers and KWs—greatly shaped all aspects of an information order. In fact, as noted earlier in this chapter, some of these actors even emerged (or could emerge in the future) as new "control centers."

For all of the dimensions that I highlighted, there remained others that I found promising but could not follow up on within the scope and constraints of this work. For one, while I identified a number of actors within an information order, I was unable to dig deeper into the kinds of labor they performed that got obscured because of the focus on information. For instance, I showed the complexity involved in how fishers gauged price information in chapter 4 or how KWs drew on their own connections within the village to make VKCs function: how exactly does the focus on information change the valuation of this labor? Do information initiatives and the enterprise of providing or asking for information draw on specific people's labor or other parts of their lives to generate its value, as has been pointed out in the contexts of social entrepreneurship and innovation (Elyachar 2005, 2012; Irani 2019; Roy 2010; Sanyal 2007)? If so, (how) is this labor acknowledged or compensated?

This book suggests that the phenomena of "info-solutionism" and "information determinism" merit more attention (Srinivasan, Finn, and Ames 2017). While the dangers and opportunities of tech-solutionism (the idea that technology can solve a problem by itself) and technological determinism (that technology will lead to/determine specific outcomes) have been examined now for decades (Ames 2019; Morozov 2013; Smith and Marx 1994; Toyama 2015; Wacjman 2004), the findings of this book suggest that info-solutionism and information determinism are equally ripe for study and particularly interesting given the diversity of ideological positions involved. An important question to examine is whether (or to what extent) info-solutionism and information determinism risk shifting the

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responsibility for individual well-being away from states and communities and solely onto information and further to individuals. Furthermore, there is no reason to believe that this question is relevant only for the Global South.

Relatedly, building up a corpus on the social construction of information and data in different contexts seems crucial to me. The findings of this book align with those of theorists of knowledge and data (as well as of intelligence and merit) who argue that knowledge at the one end and data at the other are both always already political and there is really nothing called "raw" or unprocessed data (Chaiklin and Lave 1993; Gitelman 2013; Jessop 2007; Porter 1986, 1994, 1995, 2018; Subramanian 2019; Willis 1981).[5] But in view of what seems like humanity's eternal quest to locate something "low level" enough—if not knowledge, then information and if not information, then data?—that everybody agrees on and that is consequently devoid of context (and politics?), it is important that we continue to document the struggles that led to the labeling of something as fact, data, information, or knowledge in the first place.[6] This feels particularly timely in light of the enormous funding and attention that both information and data have attracted in recent times.[7]

A fourth direction of future inquiry pertains to our understanding of information in practice, especially where it is seen to reside and its veracity. Building on the relational focus of the book, and its move away from reifications, could we explicitly retheorize information along the lines of knowledge as "distributed throughout the complex structure of persons-acting-in-setting" (Lave 1993, 9) rather than as resting in fixed repositories, whether in the heads of individuals or in digital information systems? How would such an understanding of information affect our analysis of how information orders work?[8] The assumed veracity of information in information-focused initiatives is similarly worth examining. While the quality and relevance of information concerned the cases I examined, only MKSS's work explicitly highlighted intentionally falsified records. In today's parlance, this might well be labeled "mis/disinformation." Research and action on the spread of misinformation on digital media has been growing steeply in the past five or so years (Akbar et al. 2020; Tucker et al. 2018)[9]; this book points to a longer history of misinformation that used other material forms in domains beyond communication. What might the past of misinformation politics tell us about its present and future?

Another aspect of an information order that merits deeper interrogation concerns the relationship between shifts in an information order and the

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creation or closing down of political spaces. Converting an informal negotiation into a legally mandated process enables some processes. But it also freezes other spaces for negotiation that had earlier been available to more people. In an informal conversation with an RTI campaigner, for example, I was told during my fieldwork that after the RTI became a national law, documents and details that were earlier obtained in "friendly" conversation were now parted with only through an RTI application.[10] While I could not follow up on this statement, the statement did illustrate the tension between legislation and negotiation, between gaining access to one space simultaneously with the closing of another, that can potentially arise following every political campaign. Thus, an important direction for future work is to address how different kinds of politics—especially the visible kind versus those of stealth—make for different kinds of resolutions that may be more or less permanent and may allow for more or less negotiation following the success (or failure) of a political campaign. What are the tradeoffs involved in the use of different kinds of politics in campaigns around access to information? These questions gain further urgency in light of the ongoing legislative and implementational weakening of the RTI in India, in parallel with its growing use.[11]

A somewhat different but intriguing category of examples of the politics of visibility/stealth vis-à-vis information are projects of enumeration and identification. This book suggests that the framing of a social situation as an "information problem," the success or failure of the associated "information solution," and the tradeoffs involved (especially between the ability to control one's visibility, legibility, or privacy, with the need for convenience or in the public interest) differ for varied populations. Since ID systems and enumeration projects hinge on making information about residents available to a state, they form a key site for such a politics of visibility/stealth (Brown 2015; Eubanks 2018; Sriraman 2018).[12] National ID projects, such as India's Aadhaar project, provide one set of cases where these negotiations play out. An alternative example well worth examining is projects of self-enumeration, where the focus is on generating knowledge about one's own community as a way of developing political self-consciousness (Appadurai 2012).

## CONCLUSION

Debates and discussions on development and democracy are only likely to grow and to be cast increasingly in terms of information and data. If information could be separated from the rest of people's lives, and manipulated

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in isolation, perhaps the causal statements about what "it" can do might well pan out. But information is—and always will be—embedded in social relations, materials, and practices. It is important to take seriously the ways in which it is intertwined with the rest of life and recognize that its costs and benefits are best evaluated only in light of the relations, infrastructure, and meanings, i.e., the information order within which it operates.

This book leverages its analyses of three information orders to conclude that our focus has to shift from measuring the divide between the "information-poor" and "information-rich" to investigating how these categories are constituted and to asking whose "information" counts and in what circumstances. It is in leveraging these political lives of information—and not in ignoring, denying, or bracketing them—that possibilities for social and economic change are to be found. It is, first and foremost, by being cognizant of this relationship between information and power, and in deepening our understanding of how the two constitute each other, that those of us who see ourselves as theorists, researchers, technologists, or activists of information can contribute. This book is an attempt to nudge us towards re-theorizing information such that it becomes impossible to separate it from politics.

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# APPENDIX 1: ANNOUNCEMENTS AT KILIPET VKC

This appendix presents a sample of announcements made by the Kilipet VKC between January and the end of April 2009. The announcements have been translated from Tamil and anonymized.

## WEATHER REPORTS

3.1.2009: Puducherry is likely to experience hot weather with a maximum temperature of 28° Celsius and a minimum temperature of 19° Celsius. The maximum wind speed is likely to be 19 km/hr.

12.3.2009: Chennai Meteorological Department has warned that development of low-pressure conditions in the coastal regions of South Kerala may cause heavy rains in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry within the next 24 hours.

## JOB, TRAINING, AND EDUCATION-RELATED

19.01.2009: Suitability of eligible candidates who have cleared their class X exams will be assessed for the posts of staff nurse and midwife or their male equivalent through a written test and interview held in Delhi. Candidates must deposit an application fee of Rs. 225.

19.01.2009: Coast Guard is employing talented young men and unmarried women who have cleared their class 12 exams with Physics and Mathematics as subjects and have completed their education at a recognized university.

9.02.2009: Job Opportunities in Puducherry government. Vacancies are available for tailoring, drawing, and music teachers. Contact address: Tamil Vocational Education Training, Kadalur. Interviews will be held till 28th February.

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20.02.2009: Sahodari, an NGO, requires a warden. Monthly salary: Rs. 2500. Meals free at the hostel. Qualification required: B.Ed. Phone number for contact: xxx

23.02.2009: Job openings for musicians in the Indian Navy. Musicians well-trained in western and Indian music and bass musical instruments keyboard, percussion, bass, etc. may apply. Applicants should have cleared their class X exams.

26. 02.2009: Job opportunities in the Indian Army. Candidates who have cleared their Class XII exams are eligible to apply. Other requirements: Age limit: 17 to 23 years. Height: 165 cm. Chest measurement: 77.82 cm. Weight: 50 kg. Please contact Army Chief Secretariat, Chennai Secretariat between 4th and 5th March.

16.03.2009: 6449 vacancies in Delhi Police. Candidates must have cleared their class 12 exams. Candidates applying for the post of soldier must have cleared their class 11 exams. Age limit for men: 18 to 21 years, age limit for women: 18 to 25 years

23.03.2009: Neyveli Lignite Corporation announces worker training program. All those who have cleared their class 8, 10, or 12 exams may apply.

22.03.2009: Those who have cleared their class 10 exams and have a work experience of at least two years or those who have completed ITI may apply for a 3-year diploma in civil, mechanical, and electrical engineering through Open School or the distance education centre.

03.04.2009: A two-month long computer training program is being organized during the summer break. Students of classes 10, 11, and 12 may register their names at the Village Knowledge Centre and collect the application forms.

14.04.2009: MUPP [Microsoft Unlimited Potential Programme] classes will start from 20th April. 19 students have joined these classes. Practice sessions are conducted every day at 7 a.m. by former Village Knowledge Centre worker Mr. X.

18.4.2009: A computer training program is proposed to be conducted. Students of classes 10, 11, and 12 are requested to participate without fail in the program. Students must carry their notebooks and pens to the Village Knowledge Centre.

20.4.2009: Indian Postal Department announces 2,255 vacancies. Class 12 graduates may apply.

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20.4.2009: Military Engineering Services announce 232 vacancies of clerks. Class 10 graduates may apply.
20.4.2009: Indian Bank announces 700 vacancies of clerks. Class 12 graduates may apply. MUPP classes will start from 20th April. 19 students have joined these classes. Practice sessions are conducted every day at 7 a.m. by former Village Knowledge Centre worker Mr. X.
27.4.2009: Training classes in embroidery and painting will be conducted at Rosma Marriage Hall. Entry fee is Rs.1000. 28 different designs will be taught. Classes will begin at 9.30 a.m. and will continue till the evening on 9th and 10th May 2009.

GOVERNANCE AND WELFARE SCHEME RELATED

3.1.2009: Chief Minister of Puducherry has announced that rice, pulses, jaggery, cashewnuts, cardamom, raisins, etc. worth Rs. 50 will be made available to all ration cardholders on account of the festival of Pongal.
06.01.2009: Chief Minister of Puducherry has announced that all essential items for Pongal will be available free of cost at all ration shops from 8th January onwards.
06.01.2009: Households that have not registered yet marriage and births in their families are requested to visit Kilipet Village Knowledge Centre and collect the requisite certificates for the same.
17.01.2009: Important announcement for Senior Citizens: Senior citizens drawing old age pensions are required to open new accounts in their names at the Indian Bank. No disbursements will be made by Anganwadis from next month onwards. Hence, it is imperative that senior citizens have accounts opened in their names at the Indian Bank without fail.
19.01.2009: All are requested to carry their ration cards to the Muthumariyamman Temple and collect free tokens for Pongal.
20.01.2009: Application forms for gas connection are now available. Officials from the Villiyanur Legislative Office will oversee the distribution of gas connection. All those who had requested gas connection may carry their ration cards to the Village Knowledge Centre
21.01.2009: Free clothes, that were meant to be distributed on the occasion of Pongal, will now be distributed at 9 a.m. today at the Villiyanur Men's Hostel. All are requested to carry their tokens and claim the clothes.

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4.02.2009: Logbooks for 100 days' employment will be distributed at 10 a.m. at the Village Knowledge Centre. Please carry photocopies of your ration and identity cards and collect your logbooks.

5.02.2009: Officials from the Villiyanur Commune Panchayat will distribute logbooks for 100 days' employment. Please carry photocopies of your ration and voter ID cards and collect your logbooks at the Village Knowledge Centre.

8 02.2009: Logbooks for 100 days' employment will be distributed today around 10 a.m. at Kilipet Village Knowledge Centre. Those who have not yet collected their logbooks are requested to carry photocopies of their ration and identity cards and collect their logbooks.

9.02.2009: Applications are invited from sugarcane farmers for subsidy. Farmers growing sugarcane on one acre of land will be given a subsidy of Rs.1000. Application forms are available at Tattachavadi. Applications will be accepted till May.

16.02.2009: Those who have not yet collected their flood relief money may do so between 17th and 20th February.

26.02.2009: Farmers affected by the storm in 2008 may carry a copy of their bank passbooks and register for rain relief at the Farmer Help Centre.

27.02.2009: Important announcement for farmers. Farmers interested in the examination of their soil may carry a sample of soil from their fields to Kilipet Village Knowledge Centre.

2.03.2009: Chief Minister Vaidyalingam has announced that old age pensions will be made available through post offices from next month onwards.

OTHERS

09.01.2009: The auspicious time for circumnavigation of Thiruvannamalai starts at 12.23 p.m. on the full moon day, i.e., Saturday, and ends at 10.05 a.m. on the next day, i.e., Sunday.

18.02.2009: No electricity supply in Mangalam and nearby areas. Due to emergency maintenance work, electricity supply will be interrupted today, i.e., on Wednesday between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. in Kilipet, Peria Agraharam and nearby areas.

20.02.2009: Contests for handicraft artisans are being organized by the Central Government. Winners of the contests will receive one lakh rupees as prize money and a shawl from the President of India. All participating

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artisans are required to submit their application forms along with their creations to The Assistant Director, Puducherrry or to The General Manager, District Industry Centre, Puducherry by 27th February 2009.

13.03.2009: Results of the third- and fifth-year exams of law colleges held in November 2008 have been declared today. The results can be obtained online or from the respective law colleges.

14.03.2009: Important information for the general public: In view of the Maasi Magam festival, a meeting of the Temple Committee has been scheduled. Issues of receipts and expenditure, land lease etc. will be discussed in the meeting. General public is requested to gather at the temple.

21.03.2009: Medical information: Eyesight weakens with age. Consumption of a red plantain a day for 21 days without a break will improve eyesight progressively.

27.03.2009: Results of the exams conducted by Azhagappa University have been declared today.

03.04.2009: Venkateswara Hospital is organizing a free medical camp from 4th April to 6th April. The camp will offer free health checkup and medicines.

3.04.2009: Tamil Nadu Election Commissioner Naresh Gupta has clarified that Self Help Groups are barred from assisting political parties during elections.

14.04.2009: We celebrated Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's birth centenary with joy and fervor. We organized many contests like Just-A-Minute, races, musical chairs, lemon-in-a-spoon, etc. to promote student participation in activities. Winners were awarded silver plates, geometry boxes, notebooks, pens, and pencils totaling up to Rs. 485. Further, we bought 1 mat and 2 pots to store potable water for the Village Knowledge Centre.

May: Mr. X conducted MUPP classes from 20th April to 29th May. 25 people had applied for these classes. Out of them, 10 participated in the selection process.

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# NOTES ON SOURCES

## FOR THE KERALA CASE

I accessed several publications on the history of the fishing sector from the library at the Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvanathapuram.

Access to SIFFS reports and publications was provided by the SIFFS offices in Thiruvanathapuram and Kozhikode, and to KSMTF newsletters by KSMTF's Thiruvananthapuram office.

## FOR THE IVRP CASE

I accessed IVRP annual reports, other background papers, and the initial funding proposal sent to the IDRC at the Chennai office of MSSRF.

I accessed correspondence from villages, needs assessment reports, earlier studies of IVRP, and digital copies of *Namma Ooru Saidhi* at the hub in Pillayarkuppam.

I obtained digital data on usage patterns, as well as monthly and annual reports submitted by KWs to the hub, from the computers at individual VKCs.

## FOR THE RTI CAMPAIGN CASE

I accessed correspondence between MKSS members and government officials, the IDSJ reports, case files for complaints MKSS had received, as well as copies of posters, a diary of lyrics of MKSS songs, scripts of plays staged by MKSS members, and lists of slogans from the MKSS office in Devdungri (including files transported from Tilonia to Devdungri in June 2009).

I also examined correspondence between MKSS and government officials as well as early drafts of the RTI from the RTI archives at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

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Copies of *Nirantar* were accessed at the residence of the newspaper's editor and printer, Ram Prasad Kumawat, in Beawar.

I received a copy of interview transcripts from an as-yet incomplete project of video interviews of MKSS members from MKSS worker Bhanwar Meghwanshi.

Video footage of the Beawar dharna and Chileshwar jan sunwai were purchased from the Social Work Research Centre Tilonia.

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# NOTES ON ANONYMIZING AND PSEUDONYMS

Place names: Except for the names of villages where VKCs were established (and names of their neighboring villages), all place names are real. "Kilipet" was given a pseudonym to protect the identity of the village residents and KWs who spoke with me.

Names of organizations: Real names of organizations have been used throughout.

Names of individuals: Real names have been used for activists, public intellectuals, project personnel, and public employees. The reason is that these are publicly visible individuals and their quotes are, for the most part, already associated with them, or they were public servants speaking about their official work. Politicians and elected members, and their political party affiliations, have remained unnamed where identifying them would make it easy to trace my site. For instance, identifying the name or party affiliation of the Kilipet MLA in the small province of Puducherry would have made it easy to identify Kilipet. Village residents have been anonymized in both Kilipet and Kerala, with those who find multiple mentions given a pseudonym and others referred to only by their occupation or role.

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# NOTES

## CHAPTER 1

1. Palaniammal and Kilipet are both pseudonyms. Kilipet and Palaniammal's story will be explored more fully in chapter 5.

2. See the Digital India website for more details: https://digitalindia.gov.in/content/programme-pillars.

3. For an example of a popular press piece, see Vivek Ramkumar's "India's Challenge: A New Information Revolution" in *US News*, June 7, 2016, at https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2016-06-07/can-india-create-a-new-information-revolution. Meanwhile, earlier versions of the claim are detailed in Menou (1993), McConnell (1995), and Hanna (1991).

4. Further, the term "information" is now associated retrospectively with entire classes of concrete objects that, in their time, were unlikely to have been seen as one thing. For histories of what may now be called information, see Blair (2011), Blair et al. (2021), Burke (2000), Gleick (2011), Headrick (2002), Hobart and Schiffman (1998), and Robertson (2021). The historians among these writers argue that the current "information age" is no break from the past or, at any rate, less of a break than say the introduction of printing (Hobart and Schiffman 1998) or of principles of organization and classification (Headrick 2002).

5. While cybernetics highlighted the role of feedback in systems, information theory saw information as a measure of uncertainty quantified in units called bits (Shannon and Weaver 1949). Information was perceived to be crucial to feedback and control, hence significant for cybernetics. This is why Kline argues that Shannon and Weaver's "scientific concept of information" and Norbert "Wiener's notion of a second industrial revolution" were the intellectual foundations on which ideas about an information age were built (Kline 2015, 6).

6. The movement was by no means restricted to these disciplines and fields. For example, Karl Deutsch used the role of information feedback in political systems in his work (Kline 2015, 145). Kline points out that the enthusiasm around cybernetics and information theory in Cold War America was partly fueled by the desire to apply mathematical models (as opposed to theoretical or physical ones) and quantify the social sciences (Kline 2015, 136).

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7. Ulric Neisser made this point while reflecting on the evolution of his own discipline of cognitive psychology (Kline 2015, 141).

8. Hayek's (1945) analysis of the centrality of price information for the working of markets, which predated these, will be examined in more detail in chapter 2.

9. This was especially true of two branches within the New Institutional Economics (NIE): transaction cost economics and information economics.

10. The initial focus in macroeconomics was on identifying the information sectors and their contribution to the US economy (Machlup 1962; Porat 1977; Rubin 1988). Later work emphasized knowledge, especially R&D, as a factor of production, (Romer 1986). Romer's work indicated that it is not only capital accumulation that leads to growth but also the accumulation of knowledge on how to do certain things well (or learning by doing). This was especially significant for developing countries since it suggested that they could catch up with the developed countries in spite of their low levels of physical capital accumulation. Romer's approach emphasized investments in building knowledge in order to grow.

11. Critics of information economics (and, more broadly, NIE) argue that theories of development that focus on information concerns explain only how certain institutions serve a purpose in the absence of perfect information. They do not explain how institutions came into being in the first place (Bardhan 1989). As importantly, the field does not take into account the role of extra-economic coercion and existing power relations in economic transactions (Hart 2001).

12. The award of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences to several economists who worked on information (Kenneth Arrow in 1972, George Stigler in 1982, George Akerlof and Joseph Stiglitz in 2001, and most recently, Paul Romer in 2018) only added to this visibility.

13. Take the example of the World Bank, which is influential in development circles not just as a significant lender but as a policymaker and knowledge producer about development. Stiglitz, who was chief economist at the World Bank between 1997 and 2000, is among the most direct and visible of such links between academia and the Bank in recent times. Additionally, the influence of academic economics on development agencies also happened in more indirect ways, such as through publications. See Goldman's account on the greening of the Bank and Woolcock's account on the social capital debates within it to understand ties between academia and the Bank, as well as the role of economists in the Bank (Goldman 2005; Woolcock et al. 2004).

14. In fact, discussions around information provision since the 1990s have invariably been accompanied by or conflated with discussions about the role of ICTs, making it difficult to separate the trajectory of ICT policy within development agencies from their ideas of information per se.

15. The International Telecommunications Union (ITU)'s influential Maitland report in 1984 condemned "the extreme inequalities of telephone access between rich

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and poor nations," drew attention to the fact that "two-thirds of the world's population had no access to telephone services" (ITU 1984), and identified telecommunications as the "missing link" in the developing world (Hudson 1997, 180). Further, the report argued that "telecom should no longer be seen as a luxury for elites, but rather as an essential service that directly leads to economic growth" and offered "a new recipe for modernization: an urgent reform of inefficient public monopolies and the transfer of technologies from advanced to developing nations" (Chakravartty 2004, 227). Development agencies and financial institutions, particularly the World Bank, took this advice seriously and began promoting interventions targeted at telecom reform.

16. While development practices seldom faithfully reflect development texts, excerpts from these texts are nevertheless helpful as an overview of how information fit into the development visions of various development agencies such as the World Bank. Moreover, since these documents were globally disseminated and discussed, they also went on to influence the crafting of national policies and visions of development agencies in developing countries.

17. A few examples from WDRs appear in a later section of this chapter. For a more detailed analysis of the WDRs in this context, see Srinivasan (2011).

18. See Schiller (1988) on the growth of the conception of information as a commodity among businesses and the rise of a field called information resource management, which treated information much the same way as anything else that had a value, a cost, and was helpful in achieving program goals.

19. Between 1992 and 1995, the IDRC initiated a formal research program, conducted workshops, and published two reports on the topic of information and development (Menou 1993; McConnell 1995).

20. See, for instance: "Information, in the abstract, means little to the engineer, the agriculturist, the farmer, the craftsman, or the doctor. Information must be subject oriented, or otherwise delimited, to be relevant for specific groups. Considering information for information's sake is a dead end" (Menou 1993, 80). Interestingly, in spite of the warnings against abstract information in the 1993 IDRC report, other parts of the report discuss information in precisely the abstract way that the excerpt warns participants against.

21. The IDRC continues to be among the foremost agencies interested in examining the relationship between information and development. It has, in recent times, categorized types of information and attempted to measure their impacts on livelihoods (Grimshaw and Kala 2011).

22. Now replaced by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

23. See the Buenos Aires Plan of the ITU, http://www.itu.int/itudoc/itu-d/wtdc/wtdc1994/baape.txt and the World Bank's infodev project mentioned earlier.

24. It also organized the World Summits on Information Society in 2003 (Geneva) and in 2005 (Tunis).

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25. For an analysis of the related trajectory of *knowledge* within development agencies, see King and McGrath (2004), who compare the practice of knowledge-based aid from the mid-1990s across British, Japanese, and Swedish development agencies, and the World Bank.

26. The related concept of an "idea gap" between developed and developing nations also gained prominence in the 1990s (Romer 1993). Romer proposed that economists study these idea gaps—or gaps in the knowledge used to create value in a modern economy—in addition to object gaps in their explanations of poverty. Furthermore, it was the provision of information, knowledge, and ideas that could close this gap.

27. Using his study based on eighteenth-century writings, Duguid (2015) finds that "while at the beginning of this period information was thought of as the response to writing, something in the head, by the end information increasingly meant the stuff in writing or elsewhere that *stimulated* this response" (352, emphasis mine).

28. The complete sentence reads: "Increased emphasis on market information and intelligence holds out a better hope for assisting developing countries to expand their agricultural exports" (World Bank 1986, 144).

29. The phrase forms part of this longer list: "small farmers must receive strong institutional support to help meet their demands for vital inputs—water, credit, and information on improved cropping practices" (World Bank 1978, 42).

30. The first excerpt is drawn from "A sound national knowledge strategy requires that governments seek ways to improve information flows that make a market economy function better" (World Bank 1998, 149). The second is from: "The extent and efficiency of the state's involvement in the economy has been critical. One lesson is that it is better for the state to focus on areas where it complements and supports the private sector (by providing, for example, information, infrastructure, health, research, and education) than on areas where it supplants the private sector (by, for example, producing cement and steel or running airlines and hotels)" (World Bank 1991, 31).

31. These shifts shaped potential areas of development focus as well as the role of the state and the market in development.

32. "A sound national knowledge strategy requires that governments seek ways to improve information flows that make a market economy function better" (World Bank 1998, 149). "Public institutions, including governments and multilateral institutions, have a special obligation to disclose information about their operations—that is, to be transparent" (World Bank 1998, 151).

33. Cognate words such as knowledge and data have also been popular in relation to ICTs, but how their relationship to information is conceptualized varies. For instance, Stiglitz and Greenwald (2015) see knowledge as a type of information (116), while Grimshaw (2011) sees knowledge as one part of making information useful and ICTs as a way to deliver information (5).

34. Drawing on Marx's economic analyses of commodity structures, Lukacs (1971 [1923], 83) sees reification as occurring when "a relation between people takes on

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the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity', an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people. See also Vandenberghe (2015) for a broader history of the concept of reification.

35. The idea that the construction of technical problems and solutions is socioculturally organized has been advanced in contexts beyond that of development, and of the Global South. For instance, in an edited volume examining "institutionalized arrangements for learning and failing to learn," Lave (1993) examines how learning disabilities, success in learning, and failure to learn are *all* socioculturally produced in various institutionalized arrangements in the West (10). We will return to this process and its consequences in the case of information problems in the final chapter.

36. Hand in hand with the focus on technical solutions is the centrality of solutions whose outcomes are measurable and quantifiable. Measurability is advocated because it generates quantifiable development. The politics underlying the quantification of outcomes also remains unquestioned, as Mitchell (1995) shows.

37. After all, information about a population has long been perceived as an essential first step to govern or "develop" them as Bayly (2000), Foucault (1978), and Scott (1998) point out, among others.

38. More frequent are analyses at the aggregate level of "information economies," "information societies," or the "Age of Information" (Bell 1973; Castells 2010; Gleick 2011; Headrick 2002; McLuhan 1964; Roszak 1994; Sassen (2004); Schiller 1997). And even such accounts focus on domains other than poverty alleviation efforts and seldom on regions outside the US or Europe.

39. This might now be changing with recent analyses of how misinformation circulates in India. See Akbar et al. (2020) for an example. (Note that such analyses may not be primarily focused on poverty alleviation initiatives.)

40. Day (2001), Duguid (2015), and, to a lesser extent, Kline (2015), Nunberg (1996), and Roszak (1994) all offer analyses of the term in the English language and in the English-speaking world.

41. See for instance, Burrell (2013), Bussell (2012), IIITB (2005), Kuriyan and Ray (2009), Slater (2013), and Wyche and Steinfeld (2015). An exception is Hetherington (2012), who explicitly examines the "productive vagueness" of the term information in the context of Paraguayan cadastral reform and records digitization.

42. Abraham (2007), Aker (2010), Hetherington (2012), Jensen (2007), and Kumar (2016) are a few examples.

43. Indeed, an even more fundamental question—of whether information can at all be identified and separated out from human transactions and negotiations for analysis—will recur throughout this book. For now, however, we will accept that, to the extent that it is identified as such in the cases we examine, it exists and can be analyzed. In the concluding chapters, I will examine this question—and the stakes involved in answering it—in greater detail.

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## CHAPTER 2

1. Scott's (1998) theorizing of local knowledge and "metis" operates on similar lines. He says less about the link between metis and channels of circulation, however, which makes that concept less useful for my purposes.

2. Note that all of these state-created information products would constitute the category of "government information" among governance initiatives.

3. A related question is whether the very conceptualization and rhetoric of information might shape an information order. I will use my cases to examine this question in the final chapters of this book toward expanding Bayly's (and other more recent) use of the idea of an information order (Bayly 2000; Finn 2018).

4. MKSS was among the first groups to work with the idea of a right to information in India and the first in rural India to use that terminology. It continued to lead, coordinate, and play an important role in campaigns that worked on state-level RTI legislations, as well the countrywide RTI Act in 2005. The IVRP, meanwhile, was among the earliest and most discussed ICT-based projects in India that also received global attention with the UNDP's Human Development Report, which cited it as an example of a creative project that addressed the global information divide (Balaji et al. 2000). The circulation of price information among fishing communities in Kerala gained cult status in academic and popular international development circles following Jensen's study (Jensen 2007).

5. The "Note on Sources" at the end of the book further fleshes out from where I accessed these documents in each case.

6. The July 2009 conference pertained to the foundation's work on operationalizing its National Virtual Academy for Rural Prosperity.

7. The IVRP and Intel ran an Intel-Learn program at the time, which involved lectures and a group project on Microsoft Office. Successful completion of the program resulted in a certificate from Intel. I conducted this course for twenty students at a village middle school in parallel with my fieldwork in September–October 2009.

8. A brief description of the second VKC can be found in Srinivasan (2011).

9. The lowest tier of the Indian local elected government system. Also refers (as in this case) to the group of villages that elects a council at this level.

10. These references are in addition to several other accounts that were written by members of MKSS.

11. See also Des Chene (1997) and Tarlo (2003) on the use of ethnography to study events from the past.

## CHAPTER 3

1. Hayek (1945) argues that "The whole acts as one market, not because any of its members survey the whole field, but because their limited individual fields of vision

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sufficiently overlap so that through many intermediaries the relevant information is communicated to all. The mere fact that there is one price for any commodity—or rather that local prices are connected in a manner determined by the cost of transport, and so on—brings about the solution which (it is just conceptually possible) might have been arrived at by one single mind possessing all the information which is in fact dispersed among all the people involved in the process" (526).

2. When it was launched in 2008, Esoko focused on providing market prices over SMS to smallholder farmers on development projects. Based in Ghana, Esoko today claims to connect over one million farmers to essential services such as weather forecasts, agronomic advice, market linkages, and insurance coverage over SMS, voice SMS, and call center; and also helps agribusinesses and development organizations reach rural communities with services and solutions. See https://esoko.com/servicedelivery/ for more details.

3. Marketplace is an app developed by the New York University Center for Technology and Economic Development in collaboration with the Ghana Commodities Exchange and Ghana Ministry of Food and Agriculture and rural farmers. Besides enabling commodities trading, this proprietary mobile phone app also makes available data for analysis on what crops farmers are buying and selling, price information, and trading frequency. See https://www.nyucted.org/research#technology.

4. MFarm was started in Kenya in 2010 to provide up-to-date market prices via an app or SMS directly to farmers. See https://www.mfarm.co.ke/ and also "MFarm Empowers Kenya's Farmers with Price Transparency and Market Access," *Wired UK*, June 21, 2013, https://www.wired.co.uk/article/mfarm.

5. See Kachra and Sarkar (2012) for a case study on Nokia Life Tools.

6. RML was launched in India in 2007 with a goal to impact the entire agriculture value chain by providing cutting-edge data analytics and information. Product offerings included an SMS-based agri-information service covering various stages of the crop cycle, market information and intelligence tools for agri enterprises, and a comprehensive agriculture information application for farmers. See McNally (2014) for a case study on RML.

7. For more on this USAID initiative that commenced in 2004–2005 and sought to link and improve regional efforts at generating, disseminating, and making commercial use of market information, see https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00K5FD.pdf.

8. See, for instance, the reference to Jensen's work in Lokanathan, de Silva, and Fernando (2011), as they describe their motivation for implementing an Action Research Project with Tradenet in Sri Lanka. Also see mentions in "To Do with the Price of Fish," *The Economist*, May 10, 2007; and "Dial 'M' for 'Mackerel': Can a New Mobile Phone Service in Rural India Help Promote Economic Empowerment?" *Wall Street Journal*, August 26, 2009. Since its publication, Jensen (2007) has also been cited 2246 times in academic articles according to Google Scholar (as of February 21, 2022).

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9. See also Burrell and Oreglia (2015).

10. Jensen's work was followed by several other studies that focused on the relationship between price information, ICTs, and development outcomes at the same sites and elsewhere (Abraham 2007; Aker 2010; Lokanathan, de Silva, and Fernando 2011; Sreekumar 2011; Steyn 2016).

11. The chairperson of the foundation, plant geneticist M. S. Swaminathan, is often referred to as the father of the Green Revolution in India and was also named one of the most influential Asians of the century by *Time* magazine in 1999. See John Collin Rudolf, "Father of India's Green Revolution Says Nation Is Threatened by Global Warming," *New York Times*, January 19, 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/18/business/global/18iht-green.html; and "Here's Why MS Swaminathan is the Father of Green Revolution in India," *India Today*, August 15, 2015, https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/gk-current-affairs/story/ms-swaminathan-father-of-green-revolution-facts-html-287005-2015-08-07.

12. See Celia Dugger, "Connecting Rural India to the World," *New York Times*, May 28, 2000; "Knowledge Centre Inaugurated in Pondicherry," *The Hindu*, September 11, 2001; Michael Le Page, "Village-life.com," *New Scientist*, May 4, 2002; and many more. See also MSSRF (2004c) for a compilation of press coverage on the project.

13. See MSSRF (2004b) for a compilation of comments from visitors to the projects. Visitors included individuals from international funding and development agencies such as the IDRC and USAID, a member of the US Congress, bureaucrats from state-level and central ministries of the Government of India, journalists, and researchers.

14. See journal articles and conference proceedings: Balaji et al. 2002; Kanungo 2002; MSSRF 2003; and Shore 1999. For discussions about the project in policy circles, see details of a policymakers' workshop conducted by the foundation in MSSRF (2003) and Ofir and Kriel (2004) for an analysis of the project's policy impact. Later, the foundation also formed a National Alliance for Mission 2007, which aimed to create a Knowledge Center in every village in India by 2007 (MSSRF 2004d) and brought it a lot of visibility.

15. Awards included the Motorola (Dispatch Solution) Gold Award and the Stockholm Challenge Award in 2001.

16. IVRP personnel in Puducherry at the time, Thiagarajan and Jayakrishnan, and ex-director V. Balaji all made this connection between the project and the 1992 dialogue in my interviews with them between August and November 2009. The 1992 dialogue itself included participants from diverse fields and the consortium that came up to translate some of the proposals made at the dialogue into an information village project included representatives from the Department of Space, Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, Indian Council of Agricultural Research, and the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development.

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17. "Today knowledge is wealth and countries which are information poor or regions which are information poor, also happen to be economically backward. How can we bring the information age to rural India, that is our first important task here" (MSSRF 1993, 4).

18. The first dialogue on biotechnology had led to the setting up of a "BioVillage" project by the foundation the previous year.

19. Small corner stores selling paan (areca nuts wrapped in betel leaves with a lime paste), cigarettes, and various other items.

20. Interview with V. Balaji, the IVRP's first project director on November 28, 2009, at his residence in Hyderabad. All quotes from him in this chapter draw on this interview. At the time of this interview, Balaji was the director for technology and knowledge management at the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics.

21. Later in 1997, a few IDRC employees met Swaminathan at a meeting in Canada where they offered to help convert the draft into a research proposal that could potentially be funded by the IDRC. Renauld Lafond, senior program specialist at the IDRC, turned out to be a great help in this process of crafting a research proposal.

22. All details on this proposal are drawn from a copy of it included in MSSRF (1999b) and obtained from the MSSRF Chennai office.

23. This point of view also worked well with the foundation's plans to set up the project in Puducherry, which did not have internet connectivity at the time (1997).

24. Balaji wanted to change what he saw as the received wisdom in the development delivery paradigm: that India's problem was its population being scattered throughout the country and that development delivery could be administered well only if everyone moved into a localized cluster of villages. He mentioned how an influential Ford Foundation consultant felt the country should be divided up into development blocks and clusters, with development inputs delivered at the cluster center. "He wanted everyone to come into 5,000 villages from where it is easy to administer the population." According to Balaji, the theory really was that "it should be like the US," and he wanted to change this paradigm of thinking. Interview with V. Balaji, November 28, 2009.

25. Material in this section is drawn from MSSRF (1999a), unless otherwise mentioned.

26. The first phase of funding for the IVRP that came from the IDRC lasted from 1998 to 2000. The second phase was funded by the IDRC and CIDA between 2001 and 2004. The Ford Foundation funded the period between the two (MSSRF 2004a, 3).

27. A note on place names here. Puducherry (earlier Pondicherry) is a Union Territory (UT) in southern India. Puducherry UT has a district that is also called

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Puducherry (and which is where the IVRP operated at this time). The capital of the UT is also the city of Puducherry that I refer to by its old name, Pondicherry, to disambiguate.

28. Interview with V. Balaji, November 28, 2009.

29. Interview with V. Balaji, November 28, 2009.

30. Since it was a star network (partly because of the VHF radio technology), each individual information shop could talk only to the hub, but the hub could talk to any of the information shops. This supported the vision of making the hub "a locally intelligent system" that could connect to villages instead of the villagers always having to visit a center situated far away (the traditional development model). Each village might not even need connectivity to the internet; they could just query the hub instead. This model was also a way to draw inputs from villages to the hub.

31. The hub was connected to the information shops by wireless transceivers that could transmit both voice and data. Technical specifications available in MSSRF (1999a) and Balaji et al. (2002).

32. Balaji worked as the director of the project from Chennai. In addition to him, the project employed two social scientists, a programmer, and a field organizer full time (MSSRF 1999a, inside cover). Part-time staff from other Swaminathan Foundation divisions in Chennai, such as the Informatics divisions, also helped with the IVRP.

33. The surveys and PRAs were geared to find out whether a village community felt the need for an information shop and was willing to support such a shop in the long term. What kinds of services were likely to be of value for that community? Since the IVRP had been conceptualized as a community-centered project, surveys and PRAs were seen as essential components to involve the community in the project from the start.

34. The survey found that a population of 21,465 individuals shared six post offices, two reading rooms where newspapers could be read, twelve public telephones, twenty-seven private telephones, and 1,129 TVs (a third with a cable connection) among them (MSSRF 1999a, 12). For more on the survey, see Balaji et al. (2000).

35. The absence of local panchayat leaders, members of legislative assembles (MLAs), or other politicians in this diagram and in the accompanying analysis is intriguing. The idea that local politics should be left to the local panchayats was perhaps one reason to keep away the linkages that involved panchayat leaders in this mapping. However, the fact was that, in several villages, panchayat leaders were closely involved in the process of applying for an information shop in their village and, subsequently, in the signing of an MoU with the foundation.

36. "We used to carry computer by car to the villages, keeping the computer under a shade of tree and show /demonstrated at the community meeting on how computer would be useful to them." Email correspondence in January 2010 with K.G.

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Rajamohan, who headed the project for a few years starting in 2000. See also IIITB (2005), v. 7.

37. A gender orientation workshop was also conducted for the foundation by the IDRC in 1998 (Azad 1999). A widely publicized *New York Times* article mentions an information shop set up on temple premises that allowed dalits and menstruating women to enter, both groups that would normally not be allowed entry. See Celia Dugger, "Connecting Rural India to the World," *New York Times*, May 28, 2000. See Michael Le Page, "Village-life.com," *New Scientist*, May 4, 2002; but also see Sreekumar (2007) who suggests that this claim is exaggerated. Balaji et al. (2002) describe more gender-related innovations and how they shaped more inclusive outcomes, while Shore (1999) outlines the IVRP's policies for ensuring access to dalits and women.

38. Interview with IVRP personnel in Pillayarkuppam, November 2009.

39. For a complete list of shops and locations see MSSRF (2004a), 4.

40. Many newspaper and journal articles as well as internal reports describe how information shops were used, especially success stories of individual users. However, consistent and comprehensive usage data across shops is difficult to find, especially for the earlier years. Some data is available in Balaji et al. (2000) (for one month in 1999) and MSSRF's 2004 impact report to the IDRC (MSSRF 2004a). MSSRF (2004a) lists the following categories of services: phone calls, program-related phone calls, agriculture, educational opportunities, employment opportunities, training opportunities, health, animal husbandry, welfare and government announcements, and general (where the highest number of users fit in most cases). For the center in Embalam that had been operating since 1998 (and considered one of the most successful), usage per month ranged between fifteen and 1,009 users and averaged 430 users in the period from December 1998 to July 2004. A newer, less successful center at Kunichampet recorded anywhere between 124 to 447 users per month and averaged three hundred users in the period between January 2003 and July 2004.

41. Interview with V. Balaji, November 28, 2009.

42. Interview with V. Balaji, November 28, 2009.

43. Interview with V. Balaji, November 28, 2009.

44. Large software companies were also significant players in the software education realm. Unlike the time the IVRP was started when software applications were not what project personnel were focusing on, learning applications increasingly became central to VKCs in the 2000s.

45. These should be of interest also because of the extent to which many of the points made in the dialogue are points that continue to be discussed in ICTD circles today (for example, the co-existence of old media with new ICTs, the need for a supporting infrastructure once information is available, the pivotal role of intermediaries, and the need for customization).

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46. I identify the term as abstract to the extent that it does not address the question "information for what?" The positive connotation I infer from the argument that it is important to not be information-poor, i.e., important to "have" information and be part of the information age.

47. Except for an isolated remark, politics was not discussed much and was thus treated as even more external.

48. What this claim misses is the possibility that citizens may well know of a scheme but demand entitlements only where they judge that they have a chance of availing themselves of the benefits. The larger point that is not addressed here is the history of everyday negotiations that rural residents have with state functionaries based on which they may decide whether a scheme is worth applying for, and whether they have realistic chances of availing themselves of the benefits of a scheme. More on this in chapter 5.

49. I rely on a draft report that was presented at the Institute for Development Studies Jaipur (IDSJ) in December 1991. The final revised report was subsequently submitted to the institute in May 1992.

50. Also spelled occasionally as Devdoongri. I stick with the spelling used on official government documents.

51. See Singh (2007) for a brief timeline of movements that had been asking for transparency since India's independence from British rule in 1947. (Singh uses the terms "transparency" and "right to information" interchangeably in his analysis). Singh points especially to the Chinese invasion of 1961 and the collapse of Indian defences, following which "the whole nation wanted to know what had gone wrong and who was responsible" (Singh 2007, 22); the decades of civil unrest and armed rebellion in different parts of India between the 1960s and 1990s that led to an outcry against human rights violations and a linked demand for transparency; and demands for transparency following the suspension of civil liberties during the internal emergency of the mid-1970s. In the State of UP vs. Raj Narain, the Supreme Court of India ruled in 1975 that "the people of this country have a right to know every public act, everything that is done in a public way by their public functionaries. They are entitled to know the particulars of every public transaction in all its bearings" (Singh 2007, 23). In 1982, the Supreme Court ruled that "disclosures of information in regard to the functioning of government must be the rule, and secrecy an exception justified only where the strictest requirement of public interest so demands" in a case related to the transfer of judges (Singh 2007, 23). Singh remarks that in spite of these judgments, a law was never seriously considered by the government. Then in the mid-1980s, two landmark cases "fought for access to environmental information" (Singh 2007, 24). One of these cases dealt with a factory in Delhi that stored hazardous chemicals without any safeguards. Before the case could be heard, a gas leak occurred. When the case was heard, it emerged that a study of the risks posed by the factory had already been conducted by the government. The report, however, was not public. In response to these occurrences, the chief justice made a remark that he wished

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"someone would take up the right to information" (Singh 2007, 31). Accordingly, an environmental NGO filed an intervention and made the case that a right to know was linked to a right to life, which was guaranteed by the constitution. No written orders resulted from the petition, but it found mention several times over the years. In addition to the environmental movement, the V.P. Singh government that came to power in 1989 also attempted to enact a right to information, but resistance from bureaucrats thwarted this attempt.

52. The report resulted from a study that was funded by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Government of India (GoI) in 1988 and channeled to the activist group through the IDSJ.

53. Correspondence between the group and IDSJ from this period, and my interview with former Director of IDSJ and economist, the late Vijay Shankar Vyas, January 9, 2010, in Delhi, illustrate a close collaboration between MKSS and IDSJ in this period. Reports resulting from this engagement provide among the best insights into the experiences and thinking that went into the years preceding the initiation of formal RTI campaigns in the region. In addition to Roy et al. (1991), see Roy et al. (1995).

54. This account of the Sohangarh land campaign was reconstructed from the following sources unless otherwise mentioned: Roy et al. (1991); multiple conversations and interviews with MKSS member Lal Singh between March and May 2009; a May 2009 interview with S. S. Meena, sub-divisional magistrate (SDM) of the region during the land campaign; and Mishra (2003).

55. In this section, I use information in the way it has been used in the extract; I do not problematize at each step the use of a single term to refer to so much. My focus here is instead on the properties and potential attributed to information as used in the extract.

56. The population may be characterized as "poor people" when this section is read on its own, but in the context of the entire report, it is clear that the conclusions are talking about "poor people" in a very specific region (Bhim and Deograh tehsils).

57. Another example has to do with a particular framing of public works. Thus, one part of the problem might well be that labor rolls at public works sites were not available and thus concealed corrupt practices. But the other part, equally, was whether public works are seen as legitimate employment or as dole from the government and accordingly whether workers were seen as employees with rights or as receivers of charity. Chapter 6 will examine this framing in greater detail.

## CHAPTER 4

1. These were also the only women on the shore besides me.

2. In 2015, Vizhinjam became the site for the controversial Adani Vizhinjam Port. By 2016, the construction of the port had significantly changed the landscape and organization of the landing center.

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3. My collaborators Jenna Burrell and Richa Kumar joined me remotely to confer as I conducted fieldwork in Kerala in 2012 for this research project. For more on the experience of being the remote collaborator in this instance, see Burrell (2016).

4. Kerala's marine fish production was around 13 percent of the country's overall by value in 2016–2017 (Directorate of Fisheries 2017). At that time, it exported fish products worth approximately Rs. 5,008 Crores (2016–2017), which accounted for roughly 3 percent of the state's revenue. In 2012–2013, which is when a substantial portion of this study was carried out, the state exported close to Rs. 3,435 crores of fish products (which translated to 18 percent by value and quantity of all India figures). Overall, fisheries contributed roughly 1.46 percent of the state's Gross Domestic Product, with the sector directly affecting a marine fisher population of 775,130 spread across 222 marine fishing villages in the state at the time (Directorate of Fisheries 2014). The continuous decline in marine landings in the state since 2011–2012 provides further background for the study of the sector in Kerala (State Planning Board 2017).

5. This section draws on interviews in Thiruvananthapuram with John Kurien, academic-activist, July 26, 2012; Vivekanandan, former director of the SIFFS, July 26, 2012; T. Peter, president, KSMTF (a trade union of small-scale fish workers of Kerala), August 6, 2012; Maglin Peter, convener of Theeradesa Mahila Vedi (an organization of fisherwomen), September 9, 2012; and Julian Telar, chief executive, SIFFS, September 11, 2012. See also Subramanian (2009) and Sundar (2010) for the gendered implications of the INP, mechanization, and export orientation in the region.

6. The increase in demand was shaped in part by the fast-growing economies in the US and Japan in this period as well as the loss of supply from China (Kurien 1991, 10).

7. Kurien's (1991) analysis of fishery department reports shows a dizzying rise between 1960 and 1985 in the price of prawns (from Rs. 240 to Rs. 14,120 per ton), sardines (from Rs. 90 to Rs. 1,080 per ton), and mackerels (from Rs. 340 to Rs. 2,790 per ton) (10).

8. Kurien (1992) points out that the number of mechanized boats in Kerala went from around a couple of hundred to 2,800 between 1966 and 1985 (9). The number of traditional craft also increased in a similar period (1961–1986) from 21,000 to 27,000 (11).

9. The only role in which women were significantly engaged in processing fish in the export sector, for instance, was in peeling, but this too was declining with the introduction of new EU and US Food and Drug Administration seafood regulations in the 1990s (Salagrama 2004).

10. Fishing cooperatives have a long history in Kerala (Kurien 1980). However, several of them—especially the ones formed during the tenure of the INP—were used by the state merely as a means to identify groups eligible for subsidies and gear. As such, these numerous cooperatives (amounting to 99 percent coverage of fishers at

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one point—see Kurien 1980, 3) were not primarily concerned with questioning the structure of the fishing economy. See Dietrich and Nayak (2006) for more on organizing by fisherwomen.

11. In addition, when they bring in a large catch, fishers may sell their fish by weight to export company purchasers at the shore. Export companies sometimes also finance boats, and the catch from those boats is sold only to that export company. These findings draw on multiple conversations in Vizhinjam, including with Peter, private investor-auctioneer and export purchaser on August 14, 21, and 24, 2012, and with Joseph, private investor-auctioneer August 21, 2012. Both names are pseudonyms; unless noted otherwise, the names of interviewees used in this chapter and from here on are pseudonyms. Only public intellectuals, activists and public officials are identified by their real names. See also the Note on Anonymizing and Pseudonyms.

12. Interview with Johnson and Yesudas, fishing society salesmen, Vizhinjam auctioning shore, August 14, 2012.

13. In this case, for instance, Joseph managed to auction a lot of two thousand pieces for Rs. 3,300, while smaller lots (about eighty pieces each) went for much more apiece (Rs. 500 and Rs. 490 per pile) (from Vizhinjam auction on August 21, 2012).

14. Interview with Peter, investor-auctioneer-export purchaser, Vizhinjam, August 14, 2012.

15. Even the price to start with was no simple decision, and I saw auctioneers falter multiple times. For instance, at the Vizhinjam shore on August 21, 2012, when private investor-auctioneer Sunil started an auction of cuttlefish at Rs. 2,500, potential buyers told him that was too high. He eventually had to restart at Rs. 2,200. Similarly, with the crabs that Lily finally bought for Rs. 330 at the Vizhinjam auction on August 23, 2012, the auctioneer had first started bidding at Rs. 300. Lily made the auctioneer bring down his starting bid to Rs. 250.

16. Vizhinjam auction on August 23, 2012.

17. Based on observations and interviews in 2012 and 2016 with female vendors at Chaalai market and roadside stalls at Keshavadasapuram, both located within Thiruvananthapuram; markets outside the city such as Ambalathara and Balaramapuram; and markets at coastal sites including Vizhinjam and Adimalathura.

18. Activist Maglin Peter and several vendors pointed out in conversations in 2012 and 2016 that those who traveled to Tamil Nadu to buy cheaper fish would also leave as early as 3 a.m., while others buying at nearer shores like Vizhinjam or Poonthura would start by 6 a.m.

19. Interview with Maglin Peter, activist, and with male and female vendors at Chaalai market, Thiruvananthapuram, September 5, 2012.

20. The setup at the market outside the city of Thiruvananthapuram, where I had accompanied Lily, had stalls in the front rows where male vendors sold their fish,

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while women were lined up in a less visible back row. It was also male vendors who stood up, yelled out to customers, and waved the fish in front of them. The women, sitting on the ground, were much less visible and did less marketing of this kind. Conversations in 2012 and 2016 with activists and women vendors who sold in other markets and from roadside stalls support the observation that female vendors have access to fewer facilities overall at markets.

21. Sundar (2010) points out that the presence of these society auctioneers has even met with protests in Kanyakumari and other fishing centers in Tamil Nadu that are geographically and culturally quite similar to south Kerala.

22. As Hapke (1996) and others point out, socially, fish vending is not viewed as a respectable occupation for women (even in south Kerala where women fish vendors do exist, unlike in the north). The activists and fish-vending women I spoke with in 2012 and 2016 attested that this attitude continues to hold, and as a result, fewer women are entering the vending profession. Consequently, the fish-vending women encountered in south Kerala are predominantly middle-aged. This may also help explain the patterns of use/nonuse of mobile phones among fish-vending women.

23. Based on observations and interviews with fish vendors in August 2012 and May 2016 at the Vizhinjam shore and fish markets in the region. The more politically involved fish vendors also mentioned using phones for coordinating their protest-related activities and activism.

24. While working in the fishing supply chain is not taboo for women on the Christian coastline, it is far from being seen as a desirable or respectable profession for them because of the amount of public interaction with men that it involves (Hapke 1996).

25. This region has fishing societies affiliated with both the SIFFS (which was first established in this region) and the government-run Matsyafed.

26. Ring-seine boats operate all along the Kerala coastline other than in the southernmost parts. The capital costs and operation of ring seines can vary widely between and even within central and north Kerala. I speak here based on examples from Chaliyam in Kozhikode district, which provides some indication of the operations in north Kerala (but not so much the central Cochin belt). See Das, Gopal, and Edwin (2012) and Edwin and Hridayanathan (1996) for more on ring-seine operations but with a focus on the Cochin belt.

27. Once the fish is auctioned, trip earnings (sales amount minus expenses, including auctioneer's commission, fuel, food, and loan repayment) are distributed between capital (fishers who had a share in the boat) and labor (everyone who went to sea, regardless of whether they had a share in the boat or not) in a 40:60 ratio.

28. Typically, private investors collected 5 percent and society auctioneers 10 percent. Societies used 6.5 percent of this amount toward loan repayment. Increasingly, private investors had also started imitating the society's model, applying some of what they collected (though not a fixed percentage) toward repayment.

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29. If at all, they might have borrowed smaller amounts (just in tens of thousands of rupees) from investors in other locations for small expenses. This loan would be repaid over time, but these investors were seldom asked to auction for the borrowers. The earnings from a trip of the gillnetter (sales amount minus expenses such as commission, loan repayment, fuel, and food) would be divided into equal parts between the boat owner, engine owner, and each worker.

30. Seasonal change in fishing grounds is an acceptable reason for selling elsewhere, but for the most part, the expectation is that fishers sell where their auctioneers are located.

31. Interview with Peter, auctioneer and purchaser in his home on August 26, 2012.

32. Interview with Nadeem, wholesaler at Chaalai market, Thiruvananthapuram on September 5, 2012.

33. Based on conversations with vendors in Vizhinjam and neighboring Poonthura as they bought fish (August and September 2012, May 2016) and sold them at nearby markets in Ambalathara (August 2012) and within the city of Thiruvanthapuram (Chaalai market and roadside vendors at Keshavadasapuram in September 2012).

34. Based on observations and interviews in 2012 and 2016 with activist Maglin Peter; female vendors within Thiruvananthapuram at Chaalai market and roadside stalls at Keshavadasapuram; markets outside the city such as Ambalathara and Balaramapuram; and female vendors at markets in coastal sites including Vizhinjam, Poonthura, and Adimalathura.

35. Thanks to Paul Duguid for pointing out this juxtaposition.

## CHAPTER 5

1. Kilipet is a pseudonym for a village in the southern Indian province of Puducherry where the Swaminathan Foundation's IVRP operated. All location and interviewee names, including village residents and KWs, are anonymized in this chapter. The exceptions are IVRP personnel, who were already associated publicly with the project (and linked with all VKCs, making it unlikely that their names could be used to de-anonymize Kilipet).

2. In addition to observations and interviews, details about Kilipet village and its VKC users draw on records obtained from the VKC and hub in 2009. These include the "Village Profile" created by each VKC and collated at the hub, user registers maintained at the VKC, and monthly and annual usage reports submitted by the VKC to the hub.

3. First interview with Lakshmi at the VKC, August 13, 2009. Multiple conversations at the VKC and at her residence through August, September, and October 2009.

4. See Appendix 1 for a sample of announcements from the VKC between January and May 2009.

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5. For a rough sense of the breakup of usage along services, the annual report for the Kilipet VKC from 2008 listed the total number of users as 2,887 (this includes repeat users counted separately), with 1,360 visiting for computer practice; 496 for a program called the Computer Aided Learning Programme (CALP); 885 to read a newspaper; and about seventy-one for "thagaval" (information) on items including educational opportunities, health, government welfare schemes, job opportunities, and general (the general/miscellaneous information subcategory had the maximum number of users in the thagaval category at nineteen). Other annual reports for this VKC, as well as from other VKCs across Puducherry, suggest that the computer training and CALP categories typically formed the largest chunk of users over the years, while thagaval users were a relatively low proportion.

6. Interviews with multiple residents, including a bandmaster and artiste/political worker at their residences on August 26, 2009.

7. Many residents also spoke about how far they had to go to even bury their dead and how it was virtually impossible to reach the burial grounds during the rains.

8. Lakshmi mentioned that almost no one in Kilipet had more than 0.75 acres of land even today, a fact confirmed by the village profile maintained by the hub as well the VAO's office. The village profile created by the VKC indicated that only sixteen people in the village had land: of these, ten were marginal farmers (in the less than 1 hectare (ha) category), and four were small farmers (owning between 1 to 2 ha). 1 acre=0.4 ha.

9. The Kilipet village profile created by the VKC indicated that 58 percent of the population was occupied as agricultural and allied laborers, another 14 percent as laborers outside the village, 5 percent in agriculture, 15 percent in private jobs, 7 percent in government jobs and 1 percent in business/trade. These proportions were largely confirmed by my interviewees.

10. Residents also made this point explicitly. Among other examples, Lakshmi once remarked that "nobody comes here to work; we go to other places to work. We go to the surrounding villages for everything. There is nothing in this village." Interview with Lakshmi at the VKC, August 13, 2009.

11. Interview with brothers at their residence, August 26, 2009.

12. The conflict between these supporters was intense and was carried on not just by that individual but sometimes by their family members as well: for instance, the young girl with whose words this chapter opened and who would not eat at a gym-inauguration feast, was the daughter of one such supporter and an example of this phenomenon.

13. Interview with the elder brother at his residence, August 27, 2009. Also mentioned in multiple conversations through September 2009.

14. "In Pondicherry, panchayats have no real power or funds yet. MLAs made sure of that, keeping all funds and powers with themselves, much as they had in earlier times with traditional panchayats." Interview with Thiagarajan, IVRP advisor at

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the hub, August 24, 2009. He went to say that this was also the reason panchayat elections were held so late in Puducherry in the first place.

15. A direct consequence was that most VKCs had been set up with the help of traditional panchayats with whom the project had its longest and strongest relationships.

16. Rajendran's claim was borne out by statements from village residents who mentioned that he had accompanied them when they attempted to get a caste or other certificate from a government office. While later KWs might also have told residents about procedures if asked, unlike Rajendran, they did not accompany residents on their journeys to government offices.

17. Interview with Velvizhi, former KW and foundation fellow (now self-employed) at her residence, September 8, 2009.

18. Interview with Rajendran, former KW, at his residence, September 4, 2009. Note that government schemes had, in fact, not been a top priority for the IVRP at the start of the project.

19. Meanwhile, there were so many more schemes implemented by different departments that few people had a comprehensive understanding of all that was available at any point in time. Even government officers confessed that this was so.

20. If we use the monthly report and usage register from July 2009 as an instance, the thagaval provided proactively by the VKC that month included six announcements about the weather, one related to education, two on employment opportunities, two on training sessions, and three related to the government. At the other end, of the 268 users that month, ten came for thagaval. Of these, five came to inquire about details of counseling sessions following school public exams, one about a weather forecast, one to procure a copy of the newsletter *Namma Ooru Saidhi*, another to find out details about a specific skilling session, and two to inquire about government-sponsored training opportunities for those with disabilities.

21. For example, many Kilipet residents mentioned hearing about government schemes and deadlines from their televisions as well as from the VKC. In terms of whether the shift was dramatic, Kilipet residents emphasized that the BC villages continued to be powerful within the panchayat. For example, the BC community had a say and got its way in where assets were located or who got elected in the panchayat. The president of the elected panchayat and his deputy at the time were also from the BC village.

22. The fact that Kilipet had a VKC while its neighboring village did not was something that came up repeatedly in conversations, especially with KWs.

23. Interview with Velvizhi, former KW and self-employed entrepreneur at her Kilipet residence, September 8, 2009.

24. They were also all men.

25. Interviews with three such men at Kilipet VKC and on Kilipet streets, August 24 and 25, and September 4, 2009.

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26. Interview with a currently unemployed former KW at Kilipet VKC, August 25, 2009.

27. Not everyone participated in the strike, but the ones who did kept the VKC closed for a day.

28. Interviews with hub personnel Girija, Jayakrishnan, and others on different occasions in August, September, and October 2009. Hub personnel were trying hard to push KWs to work toward raising funds at the village level by leveraging their local boundary partners or by selling more services at the VKC. They themselves had no time to spend on the fund-raising endeavor and already seemed overworked with their triple objectives of coordinating among VKCs, maintaining existing links with supporting agencies and finding sponsorship for the hub, even as the hub itself was losing personnel to other jobs and better salaries. Hub personnel were also on the defensive sometimes, saying that in the MoU signed between the foundation and the village at the start, the village had promised to provide volunteers. Nowhere was a salary mentioned in that document.

29. The VKC was associated with educated people. Time and again, I heard residents without a formal school-based education say: "What will we do there? That's for the educated folks." KWs were therefore expected to be visibly educated people, who knew computers and English. Residents were, therefore, not happy with the choice of local women who were not highly educated and did not know English as KWs, as several interviews indicated, including one with Sandhya, a female SHG member and owner of a shop in the village, on September 7, 2009. Further, KWs themselves were not very confident of what they could teach students once students mastered the basics.

30. In this, the Kilipet VKC bears out research on several ICT-based initiatives that suggests that such centers are valued most as providers of computer education especially in rural India (Pal 2008).

31. The database of government schemes did not come up in conversations. A few people mentioned being accompanied by Rajendran on their trips to procure government certificates but, on the whole, certificates were also not mentioned in relation to the VKC.

32. Using the monthly report and usage register from July 2009, of the 268 users at the VKC that month, 234 were men. Moreover, 184 users (i.e., a majority) were between six and twenty years of age, seventy-six users were between twenty-one and forty, and eight users were between forty-one and sixty. Other monthly and annual reports, as well as interviews, suggested that the relative numbers of male and female users and users from different age groups in this month were fairly typical. For instance, in 2006, there were 1,194 users, 85 percent of them male; in 2007, the VKC had 2,887 users, 76 percent of them male.

33. Caste details were not maintained by the VKC, but the relatively low number of visitors from other villages indicated in annual reports provides an indication of

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the caste break up. (Kilipet's own population is all from the SC community, while neighboring villages covered by the VKC are from the BC community.) In July 2009, for instance, only three of the 268 users came from other villages. For all of 2006, this number was forty-eight (of the 1,194 users overall); for 2007, it was 194 (of 2,887 users overall). Sreekumar (2007) and others have also pointed out that caste and gender shaped VKC usage at other sites of the project.

34. One reason for this was that many men, especially young adults, visited the VKC and made it their own space through their chatting and banter. This made it difficult for young women to negotiate visits to the VKC with their families.

35. Former KW Rajendran, for example, was cut up about the fact that the foundation had not picked him as a member of its prestigious National Virtual Academy despite all his work with it and the VKC. With this incident, his and his family's connection with the VKC declined. In another case, Sandhya, a middle-aged woman who was a member of an SHG, earlier associated with the foundation and now the owner of a small daily needs store, was uncomfortable with one of the current KWs with whom she had history during her days in that SHG, so she and her networks avoided visiting the VKC. See also Bailur and Maseiro (2010) on the tightrope walked by intermediaries because of similar tensions within the community in other ICT projects.

36. "100-days work is a waste, look at the price of things," said a mason when I talked to him at his Kilipet residence on September 18, 2009. "Coolie work gives us Rs. 200 a day." MGNREGA work paid Rs. 100 a day at the time. A group of women who worked as coolie laborers said, "100-days work rates are not great. People employed elsewhere can work two shifts and therefore earn more. But there is no other agricultural work available. That's why 100-days work would have been good." I spoke with them on the street in front of their houses on September 10, 2009.

37. In fact, even the preliminary consultation with village residents through which worksites were supposed to be decided as per the rules of the scheme had not yet taken place.

38. Interview with a panchayat president at his residence, September 22, 2009; interview with an elected panchayat member at his residence at the end of September 2009. "The ward member does not tell us anything. There are no meetings," observed the same group of women referred to in the previous note. "He might be doing something about 100-days work, but we don't know if he's putting enough of an effort into it" ("risk eduthu seiyaraangalannu theriyallai" in Tamil).

39. Interview with BDO personnel in Villianur, October 8, 2009. At the time, the 100-days scheme was funded by the central government and channeled through the Block office to individual panchayats.

40. Neighboring villages had already set up worksites, a fact that Kilipet residents were keenly aware of.

41. Interview with a middle-aged coolie worker at her residence in Nalla Nagar, September 22, 2009.

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42. When the village moved to its current location, they were on land belonging to an individual who later donated the land to the community. Residents received temporary pattas for this land.

43. Events reconstructed based on conversations with many residents, including a resident employed as a wedding drummer, another who was an artiste/political worker, the former KWs mentioned earlier, as well as residents of Nalla Nagar.

44. Residents emphasized that they voted out of sympathy for the other candidate, who came begging for votes.

45. Interview with a group of four women, three of them coolie workers, on the street in front of their houses, September 10, 2009.

46. Nalla Nagar residents also complained that service provision agencies did not pay much heed to them even during emergencies, such as when their thatched houses caught fire during the summer or when the region flooded during the rainy season.

47. Residents also mentioned the presence of middlemen whose job was to collect people for staging an agitation. The livelihood of these mediators was hit if people just came together by themselves to protest. Internal disputes over the division of a parent's land among offspring added an extra dimension to the current stalemate. Interview with drummer at his residence, August 27, 2009; interview with founders of the VKC at Rajendran's residence, September 4, 2009.

48. Interview with Nalla Nagar resident at her residence, September 24, 2009.

49. "We have no credentials, no proofs, no documentation to prove who we are," said a resident of Nalla Nagar who had neither a patta nor 64-evidence when I spoke with her and her neighbor in front of their houses in Nalla Nagar, August 27, 2009. "We don't have 64 evidence. We can't apply for any schemes because of that. We live as slaves. We are told to go back and look for people who can prove that we were around in this place and not in Tamil Nadu in 1964 . . . We have always been slaves. Earlier, at least the Reddiyars and Chettys [land-owning communities belonging to higher castes] used to help out of pity. The politicians today don't even show pity. They only work for votes."

50. Interview with former traditional panchayat leader at his residence, September 19, 2009.

51. Interview with Palaniammal, former SHG member and coolie worker, September 10, 2009. She related to me the story of how she and her husband dug up his school records, met an MLA, and also paid a bribe to a bureaucrat along the way before they could get a 64-evidence to use for their son. She was relieved that she did not have to repeat the process for her daughter, who could now use the same proof.

52. Her son had to provide his parents' 64-evidence to get his caste certificate.

53. I am excluding here people like Sandhya, the middle-aged SHG member we encountered earlier who said she had the documents for 64-evidence but was

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nevertheless facing problems receiving a certificate based on that. In an interview on September 7, 2009, she said: "When my son had to get a caste certificate in order to get admission in college, I had sent him to the tahsildar with the 64 evidence and all other documents. He went for three days and the tahsildar would not sign. I went then, and I asked him what the problem was. 'You keep telling us we don't educate our children and this is what you do when we try to educate them? If my son doesn't have the caste certificate by twelve today, he will lose a year. I have given all the documents. I won't move till you sign the certificate.' All those around had told me I would never get the certificate. But I kept sitting, and finally the tahsildar did sign. A doctor who was around told others, she's an M. S. Swaminathan leader, that's why she can speak like this. Others could not have."

54. Interview with Palaniammal, former SHG member and coolie worker, and her husband at their residence, September 4, 2009.

55. Interview at the Pillayarkuppam office, August 4, 2009.

56. A thread with a gold pendant that the groom ties around a bride's neck as part of a Tamil Hindu wedding ceremony.

57. The IVRP's first director V. Balaji (who we met in chapter 3) clarified that during his tenure there was no explicit decision on what information not to provide, only that the IVRP should provide what was locally relevant. "We did not discount politics, but it got discounted on its own," he said. His reasoning for why this happened was that the IVRP was dealing with "primarily social organizations" [the traditional panchayat] that did not want to be associated with politics, thrived "on an acceptable consensus," and would "not do anything that will disrupt that." Interview on November 9, 2009. By the time of my research, this had changed, and KWs were explicitly told not to share political information.

58. When KWs said they did not make "political" announcements, they meant that they would not allow associates of a political party to make announcements specifically on behalf of that party. KWs did, however, regularly make announcements regarding welfare schemes introduced by the state. The political climate of a village like Kilipet ensured that such a scheme was immediately connected to the ruling party and the ruling party MLA in residents' minds.

59. They were also not talking of electoral politics, especially of contesting in them. Palaniammal laughed off the suggestion, saying "poor people like us can't stand for elections. How can we when we don't have money to spend for elections? Here nobody votes without being paid money." Interview with Palaniammal, former SHG member and coolie worker, September 4, 2009.

## CHAPTER 6

1. The chapter draws heavily on the more detailed account of the campaign and the region presented in Srinivasan (2011).

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2. At the time of this research, the most significant such public works entitlement was through MGNREGS, the "100 days work" that came up in the previous chapter.

3. "Reports legitimate(d) policy, manuals engineer(ed) it, and records form(ed) the basis of the entire system," playing a crucial role in India under the British Crown (Saumarez-Smith 1985, 162). Documents were pivotal because British officers, frequently transferred between locations, found themselves "helplessly dependent" on native officers, yet distrustful of them (Hull 2003, 293). Writing and documents (including detailed manuals and codes laying out administrative procedures to guide action) thus became part of the British administration's "graphic regime of surveillance and control" (293).

4. The role of the state in famine relief in Rajasthan was formalized by the British in 1880 with a Famine Relief Code, which was replaced by the Scarcity Manual following India's independence in 1947 (Drèze 1995).

5. This section draws on the following Famine Commission Reports unless otherwise mentioned: Government of India (1880). *Report of the Indian Famine Commission 1880* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office); Government of India (1898) *Report of the Indian Famine Commission 1898* (Simla); Government of India (1901). *Report of the Indian Famine Commission 1901* (Calcutta).

6. The Scarcity Manual offers many criteria for declaring a region famine-affected, including distress migrations, increase in thefts, and news of starvation deaths. In practice, the government "relies almost exclusively on the land-use report and the losses in sowing and production reported therein" (Khera 2004, 4). The land use report compares the area sown and production in the current year with the average production for the past few years; the region is declared "famine-affected" where crop losses are more than 75 percent.

7. In 1987, thirty-nine of the 110 villages in Bhim tehsil (in which Devdungri was located) were declared affected by famine (Roy et al. 1991, 30).

8. Work had to be completed using manual labor; it must not use machinery where manual labor could achieve the task; it could not be subcontracted to private contractors (who might employ machines, not labor); and the ratio of the cost of materials to the cost of wages could be no more than 40:60 (to encourage labor-intensive works).

9. The muster roll, with its record of details about workers—including their skill level (different levels were paid differently), their gender and age (men, women, and children were paid differently), attendance, the amount they worked, and their work groups—was a key document at worksites that was described in the Famine Commission Reports of the 1880s. In addition to worker details, the muster roll also contained wages calculated based on these details. Thus, the muster roll is essentially a labor payroll that has been maintained in paper form for over a century.

10. Upon approval, worker payments were sent to the mate, who paid workers in cash. Suppliers of materials used at the worksite were similarly paid after the verification of bills and vouchers.

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11. Famine Commission Reports from the 1880s, for instance, described all components of famine relief where the state played a role. The 1880s reports recommended that famine relief administrators keep detailed records to: prevent overpaying or underworking workers; keep the costs of public works down; monitor workers; and systematize the calculation of the cost and benefit of relief across provinces.

12. See Drèze (1995) for an account of how every aspect of British famine relief (form and amount of wage, distance of worksites from where workers lived, and everyday rules at the worksite) was shaped by the idea that the "undeserving" had to be kept out and that the demand and supply of labor be allowed to work through the market mechanism with as little interference from the government as possible. The underlying ideas of British famine relief have shaped present notions about famine relief in India.

13. FRW rules only had the perverse effect of intensifying the government's initial concerns about a "lazy" workforce. FRW workers realized that no matter how much work they did, they would be paid only as much as everyone else. Supervisors at worksites also expressed little expectation of a tangible output at an FRW site. Their supervisory work reflected this attitude, as they focused on keeping workers at the worksite the whole day rather than on ensuring task completion. In a majority of the cases, a specific task was never even clearly assigned, something that workers quickly realized. Thus, work at FRW sites largely settled into a "Famine Relief mentality" for both workers and supervisors. For the workers, working at an FRW site essentially meant reporting to the site on time, doing some work, staying at the site through the day, and being paid the same as everyone else at the end of a fortnight. For the mates, their work became recording attendance, maintaining muster rolls, supervising that some work went on at the site, getting work measured once in a while, and paying wages. Thus, assumptions about the productivity of workers on a public worksite fundamentally shaped both what the documents and rules of FRW looked like and what tasks the individuals related to worksites focused on.

14. Activists argued that in spite of the "Relief" label, the rules framing FRW suggest that the goal of such work was not only to provide relief in conditions of famine, but also to yield a specific output or asset on completion. If this had not been the case, and money from relief schemes was treated as charity from the government, challenging FRW rules or fighting for the rights of workers might not have been feasible. In their existing form, however, FRW rules suggested that relief works provided productive employment and that workers therefore had the rights of a public employee, including being paid at least minimum wages.

15. Sanjit Roy vs. State of Rajasthan (1983) 1 Supreme Court Cases 525. Writ Petition no. 6816 of 1981 decided on January 20, 1983. The Rajasthan government had relied on the Rajasthan Famine Relief Works Employees (Resumption From Labour Laws) Ordinance, 1964, to argue that works under FRW were exempt from labor laws, including the Minimum Wages Act of 1948.

16. Even after the Supreme Court struck down as unconstitutional the Rajasthan government's exemption of FRW from the payment of minimum wages in

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1983, debates persisted about the basis of the wage paid to an FRW worker. In practice, workers at FRW sites in 1987 were still expected to both complete a task and to stay a specific number of hours to earn full wages.

17. Moreover, if a worker was not in the village when payments were being made, his or her wages went into a black hole called "unpaid," from which people knew it would not be recovered. Interview with Chunni Singh, MKSS worker, in Paluna, May 31, 2009.

18. This section is based on the following sources unless otherwise mentioned: interviews with B. N. Chaudhary, who was the SDM during the minimum wage campaigns, at his Jaipur office on June 2, 2009; R. Singhvi, the collector at the time, at his residence on December 17, 2009; M. L. Mehta, then the secretary (agriculture) and later chief secretary, government of Rajasthan, at his residence on June 2, 2009; multiple interviews with several MKSS members, including Chunnibai, Narayan Singh, and Shankar Singh between February and May 2009; and narratives from Roy et al. (1991) and Mishra (2003). Newspaper articles and correspondence with government departments (retrieved from the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library's Mazdoor Kisaan Shakti Sangathan collection's RTI papers) are referenced where used.

19. Translated from the Hindi Poora kaam, poora daam, which became a popular slogan in the campaign. See Aruna Roy and Nachiket Udupa, "The Mass Job Guarantee," *Himal SouthAsian*, September 1, 2010, https://www.himalmag.com/the-mass-job-guarantee/. The slogan was also mentioned in multiple conversations with MKSS members, including one with Lal Singh, Nikhil Dey, and Shankar Singh at the MKSS house in Devdungri on February 22, 2009, and with Narayan Singh at his residence in Devdungri on May 11, 2009.

20. Letter dated December 22, 1987, from Aruna Roy and Shankar Singh to assistant engineer, Irrigation Department; Deogarh mentions this agreement and subsequent issues in its implementation.

21. Letter from Shankar Singh dated May 2, 1989, addressed to executive engineer Kankroli, mentions that work was measured out for groups of twenty workers on December 16, 1987.

22. Minimum wage at the time was Rs. 11 per worker per day.

23. Interview with Shankar Singh in Kaamli Ghat, May 26, 2009.

24. Also, though the implementation and paying agency were supposed to be separate, the mate was associated with both. Come payment time, the mate would pay the twenty residents he knew had not been at the worksite separately and then make the payments to the rest of the workers at the worksite.

25. "Kaagazon ki apni hi kahaani hai" [Documents have their own story to tell], said Shankar Singh in my interview with him in Kaamli Ghat, May 26, 2009.

26. They were paid Rs. 6 per day per worker.

27. Jawahar Rozgar Yojana translates to Jawahar Employment Scheme.

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28. Minimum wage had risen to Rs. 14 per worker per day by this time.

29. They were paid between Rs. 9 and Rs. 10 per day per worker. See "Shramikon ne kam mazdoori lene se inkaar kiya" [Workers refuse to accept lower wages], *Rajasthan Patrika*, July 6, 1990, Udaipur edition.

30. "Nyoonatam mazdoori ke liye shramik High Court mein appeal karenge" [Workers will appeal to High Court for minimum wage], *Rajasthan Patrika*, August 13, 1990, 12, Udaipur edition. The workers won (as workers eventually have in most minimum wage court cases in India), but only after eight years.

31. "Rajasthan Government Flouting Minimum Wage Law," *Indian Express*, August 16, 1990, 5; and "Afsaron ke haath ka khilona hai, nyoonatam mazdoori kanoon?" [Is the minimum wage legislation a toy in the hands of officers?], *Dainik Navjyothi*, September 1, 1990, 9. MKSS also organized a conference on minimum wages in October 1990.

32. Minimum wage was Rs. 22 per worker per day at the time.

33. The figure they proposed was Rs. 11 per day per worker, half of the minimum wage. A copy of this resolution too could not be accessed by the workers. Interview with Shankar Singh, May 26, 2009.

34. Based on a flier issued by MKSS titled "Bhim ki janta se appeal" [Appeal to the people of Bhim]; letter dated May 8, 1991 from MKSS to the chief secretary (CS) to lodge a complaint against unwarranted police brutality; and a flier issued by the Congress party's block committee in Bhim titled "Kisaan evam mazdooron se sahaanubhoothi" [Our sympathies with farmers and workers], expressing sadness and surprise at the police action at the dharna.

35. Note titled "Demand for Minimum Wages under JRY. Problems of Implementation and Policy" handed to Central team on May 5, 1991.

36. "Kendra ki rajya sarkar ko chetawani. Nyoonatam mazdoori nahi di tho sau karod ka anudaan nahi" [Center warns state government. If minimum wages are not paid, 100 crores will not be disbursed], *Navbharat Times*, May 11, 1991, 1, Jaipur edition.

37. "Shramikon ko nyoonatam mazdoori ke bhugtaan par aandolan khatm" [Campaign ends on payment of minimum wages to workers], *Rajasthan Patrika*, May 11, 1991, Udaipur edition.

38. According to him, the reason for bypassing the state government act was simply that the central government made for higher visibility in the news than the state government, which served the Barar campaign well.

39. An activist was quoted as saying "If only they would stop treating this as dole and rigorously demand work, the labour on relief works could truly help in building national resources." See "Rajasthan government flouting minimum wage law," *Indian Express*, August 16, 1990, 5.

40. He said he had explained as much to Roy and her colleagues, but they could not agree on a compromise.

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41. The BDO of the time, while emphasizing his faint memory of the event, said that he had been told that work was not completed. He conceded that it might be the responsibility of the supervisors, especially the mate, to ensure that work was completed and that workers should not suffer for noncompletion of work.

42. Moreover, the health condition of the fasters had become precarious by that point, and it was essential to feed them or else they would have died. (Interview with B. N. Chaudhary, SDM during the minimum wage campaigns, at his Jaipur office, June 2, 2009.)

43. Mehta saw all of these as "honest differences" between activists and the government.

44. The account of the first public hearing draws on my interview with Shankar Singh, May 26, 2009; Kidambi (2008, 10–11) and Mishra (2003, 8–11) unless otherwise mentioned. Not many people in villages Kot or Kirana, other than a local schoolteacher who helped write the application for the person who had not been paid for his work, remembered the details of the public hearing fifteen years after the event.

45. The Indian government undertook structural economic reforms and economic liberalization in 1991, following a balance of payments crisis. Changes included initiating privatization in various sectors of the economy, deregulation, and opening up for trade and investment.

46. Such as for a proposed scheme guaranteeing a minimum number of days of employment, which MKSS had wanted to pursue. The suggested figure was one hundred days. JRY was providing about fifteen days of employment to a person at the time and did not have resources to provide more days of employment.

47. The 73rd Amendment of 1993 mandated the setting up and regular working of multi-tier, elected Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) in rural India.

48. This is referenced in a press note from MKSS for May Day 1994 titled "May Day in Bhim Examines the Post Dunkel Future of Workers and Peasants and Examines Strategies for Survival" in which people "want to know where foreign loans have come or gone when the economic status of the village remains unchanged."

49. MKSS statement December 1994.

50. References to a people's court in "O gram sewak tho aankhya ma dhool jhok gyo—Pradesh mein Kirana gaanv mein pehli jan-adalat lagi" [Oh, the gram sewak fooled us—First People's Court in the state held in Kirana village], *Navbharat Times*, December 3, 1994; and "Villagers Get a Chance to Air Complaints," *The Hindu*, December 9, 1994.

51. The BDO had earlier heard MKSS members deliver a talk at his civil services training institute, the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration (LBSNAA), and this had prompted his offer.

52. This willingness and enthusiasm possibly equally indicated the naivete of the BDO, who was a new recruit and an acting BDO. A few years later, the same individual created difficulties for MKSS in conducting a public hearing in another village.

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53. Singh mentioned a few reactions he recalled from the reading out of muster rolls: "I was in the military and am retired now. I have never worked on these works. Why is my name on the muster roll?"; "This man lives in Kota, he hasn't worked here"; and "There is no one of this name in the village."

54. MKSS flier titled "Aapke ilaake mein pehli jan sunwai" [The first public hearing in your region], November 29, 1994. The pamphlet asked: "Whose development is this? What sort of development is this? Public works worth Rs. 18 lakhs had been carried out in 1993–1994 in the three panchayats: did people see works worth that much in the panchayat?" The pamphlet invited everyone to attend and ask: "does development policy, implementation and information belong to a chosen few?"

55. "O gram sewak tho aankhya ma dhool jhok gyo—Pradesh mein Kirana gaanv mein pehli jan-adalat lagi" [Oh, the gram sewak fooled us—First People's Court in the state held in Kirana village], *Navbharat Times*, December 3, 1994.

56. Sona Thakur, "Villagers Turn Arbiters, For a Change," *The Telegraph*, December 14, 1994.

57. Letter from MKSS to CS, M. L. Mehta, January 2, 1995. The Bhim hearing also brought up the range of reasons that were used to avoid showing records, including unique ones like records having been eaten up by a cow.

58. Letter from MKSS to then chief secretary, M. L. Mehta, January 1995 and MKSS's press note dated December 17, 1994.

59. "O gram sewak tho aankhya ma dhool jhok gyo—Pradesh mein Kirana gaanv mein pehli jan-adalat lagi" [Oh, the gram sewak fooled us—First People's Court in the state held in Kirana village], *Navbharat Times*, December 3, 1994; Sona Thakur, "Villagers Turn Arbiters, For a Change," *The Telegraph*, December 14, 1994; Lokpal Sethi, "MKSS on a Noble Mission," *The Hindustan Times* n.d.; Malini Nair, "Nullifying Bullying Powers of Babus," *The Hindustan Times*, December 12, 1994; "Villagers Get a Chance to Air Complaints," *The Hindu*, December 9, 1994; "Bhim mein jan sunwai aaj, 'Vikas' ki pol khulegi" [Public hearing in Bhim today, "development" will be exposed], *Navbharat Times*, December 7, 1994, Jaipur edition and others.

60. In other consequences, extensive media coverage led to "trials" initiated by the media. "Public Hearings sometimes degenerated into inquisitions," said Mehta. Interview with M. L. Mehta, chief secretary at the time of the hearing, at his residence, June 2, 2009.

61. Letter from MKSS to collector dated December 22, 1994, requesting records pertaining to development schemes.

62. Letter from MKSS to collector dated March 7, 1995; and MKSS pamphlet titled "Hamaare ilaake mein chauthi jan sunwai" [Fourth public hearing in our region].

63. "Kaagazon mein hue gram vikas ke ghotaalon ka pardafaash. Vikaas kharch ka byora nahin bataaya tho adhikaariyon ko court mein ghaseeta jayega" [Scams in village development shown on documents exposed. If accounts of development

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expenditure are not provided, officials will be taken to court], *Nirantar*, January 9, 1995; "Jawaja mein aaj jan sunwai, gram sewak virodh karenge" [Public hearing in Jawaja today, gram sewaks will oppose (it)], *Navbharat Times*, January 7, 1995, Jaipur edition; "'Khuli sunwai' mein grameenon ne apni samasyayen bataayeen" [Villagers speak about their problems in an "open hearing"], *Rajasthan Patrika*, January 9, 1995, Jaipur edition; "Saarvajanik kharche ki soochanyen nahin dene ke khilaaf grameen aandolan karenge" [Villagers will conduct a campaign against information regarding public expenditure not being provided], *Navbharat Times*, January 10, 1995, Jaipur edition.

64. A more direct consequence of the Jawaja public hearing came from complaints raised by a resident of the Asan panchayat following the hearing. From Mishra (2003); interview with Kesar Singh, who made the complaint, at his residence on May 13, 2009; letters from MKSS to the Ajmer administration dated September 20, 1995, and September 26, 1995.

65. Letter from MKSS to the CS dated January 2, 1995. According to the letter: "Free access to information, prompt and exemplary action against offenders, and support for the ordinary people raising their voice are areas in which the administration alone can play a crucial role."

66. "Panchayat vikas kaaryon mein gadbadi karnewaalon ko dandit kiya jaayega. Vidhan Sabha mein Shekhawat ki ghoshna" [Those embezzling from panchayat development works will be punished, Shekhawat announces in Vidhan Sabha], *Dainik Navjyothi*, April 6, 1995, Ajmer edition. MKSS was already pursuing the possibility of making copies of panchayat records pertaining to development works available to all citizens. In a letter to the CS in March 1995, MKSS reminded the CS that he had promised to issue an order to this effect. The written order was important because in some cases, district collectors would refuse to work without one.

67. The words used by the CM in the assembly hint that the public hearings might have been a big part of why the announcement was made. An MKSS song with similar lyrics had been popular in its campaigns at the time.

68. Translated from the transcripts of speeches in the Rajasthan Assembly, April 5, 1995, 433. In my interview with him, M. L. Mehta suggested that while MKSS was indeed doing good work, it was not responsible for the birth of the idea of a right to information. The government was, he claimed, based on this speech.

69. In the MKSS journal, quoted in Kidambi (2008, 10).

70. At a more pragmatic level, public hearings also made visible the different ways in which government funds targeted at development works were misused. Mishra (2003) classifies the corruption identified in rural development works by the public hearings in six categories: purchase overbilling, sale overbilling, fake muster rolls, underpayment of wages, tinkering with labor-material ratio, and ghost works.

71. Interview with Shankar Singh in Kaamli Ghat, May 26, 2009.

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72. Prior to the summit, a smaller meeting was held in Beawar that was attended by about one hundred Beawar residents and organizations. Participants at the meeting had supported a resolution that the state must make available copies of documents (Roy et al. 1995, 15–126).

73. Invitation letter by MKSS dated September 19, 1995. Also see MKSS pamphlet dated September 20, 1995, that states "Beawar mein dinaank 25-9-95 ko soochanaon ke adhikar par aam sabha. Rajya-sthareeya abhiyan ki shuruaat. Lekar rahenge hum is baar soochanaaon ka adhikar" [Public meeting on right to information in Beawar on 25-9-95. The start of a statewide campaign. This time, we will not budge without getting a right to information].

74. See "Soochanaon ka adhikar milega tho desh samrudh hoga" [With a right to information, the country will prosper], *Nirantar*, September 26, 1995, 1; and "Soochanaon ko dabaane se brashtachaar badhta hai" [Suppressing information leads to growing corruption], *Nirantar*, September 26, 1995, 4.

75. Here, and later, I point to the diverse ways in which information and right to information were used in the events leading up to the Beawar dharna, indicating an idea and terminology that was still nascent and not quite standardized.

76. *Nirantar* (translates from the Hindi as "Continuous") was a daily owned, edited, and printed by Beawar resident and journalist Ram Prasad Kumawat.

77. For example, an important meeting took place at LBSNAA, a research and training institute on public policy and public administration. Indian civil servants receive training for their jobs at this institute. A small group—including members of MKSS, senior civil servants, and activists—started meeting there to discuss the RTI in October 1995 (Mishra 2003, 22; Roy et al. 1995, 15–127). The LBSNAA prepared a draft for access to information that was released in early 1996. This group was to prove crucial in the events leading up to the passage of the RTI Act in 2005.

78. "Mazdoor Kisan Shake Sangathan ka kal se dharna" [MKSS starts a dharna tomorrow], *Nirantar*, April 4, 1996, 4; "Soochanaon ko Jaanane va prashasan ki jawaabdehi ko lekar dharna" [Dharna about knowing information and the accountability of the administration], *Nirantar*, April 6, 1996, 1. Earlier articles (from April 4, 6, and 8) used longer phrases like the "right to know information" and the plural form of information in Hindi ("soochanaon") while describing the dharna. However, the term "right to information" became increasingly standard after the initial days of the dharna.

79. From MKSS, "Background Note for the Dharna on the Right to Information Being Organized by MKSS from April 6, 1996, in Beawar," April 4, 1996.

80. References to the government's order of April 6, 1996, and MKSS's response on April 9, 1996, in a letter from MKSS to the CM dated May 24, 1996, titled "Access to Information: The Government moves grudgingly." See also MKSS pamphlet titled "40 din se Beawar mein Dharna jaari hai" [Dharna in Beawar

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continues for 40 days] that elaborates on differences between the CM's verbal assurances of April 5, 1995, and the order of April 6, 1996, a year later. "Vaayda jab kiya hai poora, kyon nikaala aadesh adhoora?" [Why the incomplete order when the assurance was complete?], the pamphlet queries.

81. The Beawar dharna has been widely written about by both MKSS members and others in their accounts of the timeline of the RTI campaign (Bakshi 1998; Kidambi 2008; Lokayan 1996, 64; Mander and Joshi 1999; Mishra 2003; Roy and Dey 2002; Singh 2007, 26). Several key moments in the dharna that were mentioned in interviews with MKSS members also overlapped with these written accounts. While most accounts focus on the nature of the audience at the dharna, as well as the negotiations with the government, I turn to *Nirantar* for more detail on various speakers at the dharna.

82. See "Mai divas par prabhat pheri nikali" [Morning procession on May Day] and "Aaj dharne baabat vichaar goshti" [Dharna related discussion meeting today], *Nirantar*, May 2, 1996, 1.

83. See estimates of numbers and contributions in "Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan dharna jaari. Do patrakar Kuldip Nayar va Nikhil Chakravarty 9 ko aayenge" [MKSS dharna continues. Two journalists Kuldip Nayar and Nikhil Chakravarty will attend on the 9th], *Nirantar*, April 8, 1996, 1; and in "Soochana ke adhikar ki maang dharna teesre din bhi jaari" [Dharna demanding a right to information continues for a third day], *Nirantar*, April 9, 1996, 1. "We were not asking people to come to the dharna or telling them we would send a car to fetch them or telling them 'Come, we will provide you a meal.' We were connecting people [to the dharna] by saying 'Pay your own [bus] fare and come to the dharna. Contribute your time to the dharna. When you come, bring along some wheat. Come and we will fight together,'" said Shankar Singh in an interview, May 26, 2009.

84. In "Jis neta ka jitna bas chala, usne is desh ko utna hi loota" [Every politician has looted this country as much as he saw fit], *Nirantar*, April 11, 1996, 1.

85. In "Chang gate par chal rahe dharne ka kayi samajik va shramik sangathanon dwaara samarthan" [Dharna at Chang Gate supported by several social and workers' associations], *Nirantar*, April 13, 1996, 1; and in "'Soochana ke Adhikaar' ki jung ke manch par diggajon ki shirkat, sarkar ki ninda" [Legendary figures participate in the forum for the battle for a "Right to Information," government criticized], *Nirantar*, April 15, 1996, 1.

86. "Vikaas kharche ke byore ki photo prathi ka aadesh chunaav baad" [Order for photocopies of accounts of development expenditure after elections], *Nirantar*, April 15, 1996, 1.

87. Other letters followed. One such letter informed the CM that the dharna would be lifted if a representative of the state government supported in writing the CM's verbal assurance of April 14 that written orders would be issued post elections regarding photocopying records. Letter from MKSS to the CM dated April 19, 1996,

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with subject line "Beawar mein chal rahe soochanaon ke adhikar par dharne ke kram mein" [Regarding ongoing dharna in Beawar about the right to information].

88. Talks announced in "Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan dharna jaari. Do patrakar Kuldip Nayar va Nikhil Chakravarty 9 ko aayenge" [MKSS dharna continues. Two journalists, Kuldip Nayar and Nikhil Chakravarty, will attend on the 9th], *Nirantar*, April 8, 1996, 1; talks covered in "Jis neta ka jitna bas chala, usne is desh ko itna hi loota" [Every politician has looted this country as much as he saw fit], *Nirantar*, April 11, 1996, 1.

89. In "Sarkar na maani tho 'soochana' ko lekar Jaipur bhi dharna" [If the government doesn't consent, dharna on "information" in Jaipur as well], *Nirantar*, April 29, 1996, 1.

90. In "Bha Ja Pa sarkar ke brashtachaar ki pol khulne ke dar se 'soochana ka adhikaar' nahi diya ja raha: Motwani" [Fear of exposure of its corruption keeps BJP government from granting a "right to information": Motwani], *Nirantar*, April 20, 1996, 1.

91. "'Soochana ka adhikaar' milne se imaandaar shaasan ki neenv padegi" [Foundation to honest governance will be laid with a "Right to Information"], *Nirantar*, April 19, 1996, 1.

92. See "Medha Patkar kal jan sabha mein bolengi" [Medha Patkar will speak at the public gathering tomorrow], *Nirantar*, April 20, 1996; "'Soochana ke adhikaar' roopi atom bum se Bhairon Singh Shekhawat darte hain" [Bhairon Singh Shekhawat scared of the atom bomb called "Right to Information"], *Nirantar*, April 22, 1996, 1; and "Beesalpur yojana se Beawar ko paani milna dhoka hai. Medha Patkar se 'Nirantar' ki vistrut baat cheet" [Deceitful to say that Beawar will get water through the Beesalpur project. *Nirantar* has detailed conversation with Medha Patkar], *Nirantar*, April 22, 1996, 4. Patkar brought up the secrecy surrounding the government's signing of an agreement with the Enron Corporation. Multinational companies also came up in a talk by Anil Prakash, a Ganga Mukti Andolan activist: "Videshi companiyon ko tho soochanyen mil sakti hain, aam aadmi ko kyon nahi?" [If foreign companies can get information, why not the common man?], *Nirantar*, April 23, 1996, 1.

93. "Arbon rupaiyon ke chunaavi vyaya mein paardarshita tho chaahiye" [Transparency needed for billions of rupees spent on elections], *Nirantar*, April 30, 1996, 1.

94. "Soochana ke adhikaar ki ladaai badi hai: Manchanda" [The battle for a right to information is huge: Manchanda], *Nirantar*, May 4, 1996, 1.

95. "Mohalla sthar par soochanaon ke adhikaar ki maang zor pakdne lagi, dharna jaari" [Demand for right to information gains strength at Mohalla level, dharna continues], *Nirantar*, May 8, 1996, 1.

96. "Shekhawat ki vaayda khilaafi se naaraaz shram sangh dwaara chunaavon ka bahishkar hoga" [Angry with Shekhawat's broken promises, workers' union to boycott elections], *Nirantar*, April 24, 1996, 1.

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97. "Grameen yuva jaththe cycle rally se pahunche, dharna sthal par aaj 'soochana' sammelan" [Rural youth groups arrive following cycle rally, "information" summit at dharna site today], *Nirantar*, April 24, 1996, 1.

98. "Gaban ke doshi sarpanch va prashaasak ki zamaanat ki arzi khaarij" [Bail application of sarpanch and administrator accused of embezzlement declined], *Nirantar*, April 20, 1996, 3.

99. "Dharne ke bane rahne se Bha Ja Pa ko voton mein ghata. 'Soochana ke adhikaar' baabat sammelan poorna" [Continuing dharna likely to cause loss of votes to BJP. "Right to information" conference concluded], *Nirantar*, April 25, 1996, 1.

100. "Soochana ka adhikaar na dena loktantra ka sabse bada makhol hai: Bajari" [Not giving a right to information the biggest joke in a democracy: Bajari], *Nirantar*, April 26, 1996, 1.

101. "'Soochana' ke dharne ko vyaapak samarthan" ["Information" dharna gets widespread support], *Nirantar*, April 30, 1996, 1.

102. A Congress MLA declared at the dharna that his party recognized the right to information as a tool for eliminating corruption. While the Congress wished to eliminate corruption, he said the BJP government in Rajasthan was scared that its corruption would be exposed if it issued an order for an RTI. See "Bha Ja Pa sarkar ke brashtachaar ki pol khulne ke dar se 'soochana ka adhikaar' nahi diya ja raha: Motwani" [Fear of exposure of its corruption keeps BJP government from granting a "right to information": Motwani], *Nirantar*, April 20, 1996, 1.

103. "Dharna ka bhonpu bhi do din bandh, grameen karyakarta bhi chunaav mein koode" [Dharna horn too will be silent for two days, rural workers too will jump into the elections], *Nirantar*, April 26, 1996, 1.

104. Note that the state-level government was not changed by the results of the national-level elections.

105. "Sarkar na maani tho 'soochana' ko lekar Jaipur bhi dharna" [If the government doesn't consent, dharna on "information" in Jaipur as well], *Nirantar*, April 29, 1996, 1, and "Jaipur Ajmer mein bhi soochana ke adhikaar ko lekar dharna shuru, 8 ko Khairnar aayenge" [Dharna about right to information starts in Jaipur and Ajmer as well, Khairnar to speak on the 8th], *Nirantar*, May 7, 1996, 1.

106. "Isi saptah 'Beawar bandh' ki ghoshna sambhav. Soochana ke adhikaar ki maang ke samarthan mein naagarikon ki pehal" [Announcement of "Beawar bandh" possible this week. Residents' initiative to express support for demand for right to information], *Nirantar*, May 13, 1996, 1.

107. "Mu.Mantri par soochana ka adhikaar dene mein taalmatol ka aarop" [CM accused of delaying right to information], *Nirantar*, May 14, 1996, 1.

108. Also "'Soochana ka Adhikaar' sambandhi dharna 40 din baad samaapt" [Dharna related to "right to information" concluded after 40 days], *Nirantar*, May 16, 1996;

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and "'Soochana ka adhikaar' laagoo karne ko vyaavahaarik banaane hethu samiti ke gathan ka swaagat!" [Constitution of committee to make implementation of "right to information" official welcomed], *Nirantar*, May 17, 1996, 1.

109. In a Hindi press release dated May 15, 1996, as well as in a letter from MKSS in English dated May 24, 1996, titled "Access to Information: The Government Moves Grudgingly." According to these documents, MKSS's demands of the government's written order from the start were that it had to include the provision for photocopying records and receiving certified copies. The government claimed that working out the modalities of implementing such an entitlement would take some time, which MKSS accepted. However, MKSS had asked for a timeframe for the issue of an order, which the government was not willing to provide. The CS's letter on May 12, 1996, also did not address MKSS's demands and was therefore rejected. Finally, the letter issued on May 14, 1996, met the demands that MKSS said it had been making all along. That is why the dharna was concluded following the May 14 letter.

110. The government claimed that MKSS had tried to gain popularity by agitating during the sensitive election period, had misinformed the public, and had tried to take credit for an entitlement that was the government's brainchild. MKSS saw these claims as a reflection of the government's attitude towards citizens: an aversion to "peaceful democratic mobilisation and protest" and to talking "to its own people" and of wanting to "initiate, deliberate and execute all creative work within the state of Rajasthan" by itself, without any need for dialogue with a cross section of people. Letter from MKSS dated May 24, 1996, titled "Access to Information: The Government Moves Grudgingly."

111. Interview with M. L. Mehta, CS at the time, at his residence, June 2, 2009.

112. The report from the committee was declared "confidential."

113. The National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI) was constituted on August 1, 1996, and would go on to lead and support RTI campaigns across India.

114. "They articulated the growing recognition over years of struggle and what became the Right to Information (RTI) campaign's basic assumption. With amazing clarity and simplicity, they said, 'So long as these records do not come out, we will always be liars. They have to come out, if we are to survive'" (Kidambi 2008, 8).

115. "Baaton mein kaagaz se soochana tak pahunche . . . hame bhi nahi pata ki yah shabd kahaan se aaya" [We went from kaagaz to soochana through conversations . . . even we don't know where the word came from]. Interview with Chunni Singh, MKSS worker, in Paluna, May 31, 2009.

116. An MKSS member said that the word might well have originated from middle class members (perhaps first in the IDSJ reports), but the underlying demand and concept came from village residents with whom they interacted. Moreover, the idea of a Right to Information was anyway present in the world at large and speakers at

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the Beawar dharna had also articulated it. The transition from asking for a right to photocopy to a right to information was almost seamless as a result. Interview with Bhanwar Meghwanshi, MKSS worker, in Devdungri, May 25, 2009.

117. "The rudiments were always there, but the question of giving copies came from the CM." Interview with M. L. Mehta, CS at the time, at his residence, June 2, 2009.

118. Data from the RTI rating program founded by Access Info Europe and the Centre for Law and Democracy to analyze the quality of the world's access to information laws. Data retrieved from http://www.rti-rating.org/country-data/.

## CHAPTER 7

1. In the Kerala case, there was no initiative. As pointed out earlier, my focus there was on how funders, designers, and the ICTD community at large understand information based on a case study of the fishers of the region.

2. See also Srinivasan and Burrell (2015).

3. While chapter 5 examined the case of one VKC and village (Kilipet) in detail, I found this a common theme across VKCs. The residents of a fishing village that had a VKC and had faced a tsunami in 2004, for instance, spoke about their disappointment that the foundation had not leveraged its networks sufficiently to bring in funding for the rehabilitation work in the tsunami's aftermath.

4. See also the role of emotion and affect on how bureaucrats deal with interpreting rules (Sriraman 2018, 85).

5. While the idea that things matter and that material form is important are no longer in dispute in most disciplines (Appadurai 1988; Clanchy 1993; Finn, Srinivasan, and Veeraraghavan 2014; Hull 2012 a, b; Miller 1998; Pellegram 1998; Sharma and Gupta 2006), information constitutes an interesting case where discussions of its material form, while they exist, are less common (Blanchette 2011; Brown and Duguid 1996; Duguid 1996).

6. This is not to restate that connections are important and necessary, but to illustrate problems in claims that see information as the *source* of power instead of examining how it is leveraged *within* power structures.

## CHAPTER 8

1. Recent work also challenges the binary and distinction between a rights-focused, middle-class "civil" society that takes on the state and a "political" society that can only afford to negotiate or wield the "weapons of the weak" with it (Chatterjee 2004; Scott 1985). For instance, using examples of how people creatively inscribed particular identities into their ID cards and systems during the Indian partition and other moments of tumult, Sriraman (2018) argues that the subaltern use both

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the language of rights and acts of negotiation to control how the state sees them. See also Subramanian (2009) on Kanyakumari's fishers and their multiple ways of claim-making.

2. For example, many residents might have been willing to join (and had indeed joined) campaigns for land certificates. But not as many residents would have joined a similar campaign for expanding the definition of 64-evidence since many residents would not have been eligible for 64-evidence (even if its definition was expanded). Residents, nevertheless, wanted the benefits of possessing 64-evidence (after all, the reason many residents migrated to Puducherry in the first place was because they could not access comparable welfare benefits elsewhere).

3. Many residents mentioned not being able to join or get others to join such protests for the land certificate either because they did not have the time, past protests had not yielded results, or they would want to be paid for missing a day at work.

4. What makes the case of information distinct and more interesting is that the term already encompasses a range of meanings (making its use in the abstract really broad in terms of what it can refer to).

5. Willis further suggests therefore that "cultural location . . . is a much better model for explaining social mobility than is the mechanistic undialectical notion of intelligence" (Willis 1981, 593).

6. Much like recent debates on "fake news," which have quickly taught us that how something gains credibility as news or as "fake" is critical.

7. The 2021 World Development Report "Data for Better Lives" is but one recent example of the perceived promise of data in the context of poverty alleviation (World Bank 2021).

8. This way of thinking about information is influenced by an understanding of cognition, knowledge, and learning that suggests they "cannot be pinned down to the head of the individual or to assigned tasks or to external tools or to the environment but lie instead in the relations among them" (Lave 1993, 9).

9. For popular press coverage on the actions of technology companies on misinformation in different regions, see also Anumeha Chaturvedi, "Covid Fallout: WhatsApp Changes Limit on Forwarded Messages, Users Can Send Only 1 Chat at a Time," *The Economic Times*, April 7, 2020; Alex Hern, " WhatsApp to impose new limit on forwarding to fight fake news," *The Guardian*, April 7, 2020; and Casey Newton, "Tech Companies Are Getting More Aggressive to Fight COVID-19 Hoaxes," *The Verge*, 2020.

10. From the Hindi "Bhaichaare mein."

11. See Sunil Prabhu, "RTI Amendment Bill Passed; Dilutes Transparency Law, Says Opposition," *NDTV*, Jun 22, 2019; and "Don't Cage RTI: Downgrading Information Commissioners Can Seriously Damage Accountability of Babus," *The Times of India*, July 21, 2019.

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12. Since several of these systems are embraced and funded in the name of public interest, recent debates around the world on tracking populations in the name of governance, citizenship, or disease have fundamentally hinged on the politics of how this "public" and its "interest" are defined in the context of information systems. On the public interest justification of systems in the Indian context, besides the debates around India's Unique ID project that has been heavily critiqued and the subject of court cases, see also "Privacy Fears as India Hand Stamps Suspected Coronavirus Cases," *Al Jazeera*, March 20, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/privacy-fears-india-hand-stamps-suspected-coronavirus-cases-200320120033460.html; and "NRC is a 'Necessary Exercise,' Modi Government Tells SC, After Months of Playing it Down," *Scroll*, March 19, 2020, https://scroll.in/latest/956590/nrc-a-necessary-exercise-for-any-sovereign-country-government-tells-supreme-court.

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